



AND STILL I RISE:

**Black Women Labor Leaders'
Voices | Power | Promise**

INSTITUTE FOR POLICY STUDIES

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Black Women Labor Leaders'
Voices | Power | Promise

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As Washington’s first progressive multi-issue think tank, the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) has served as a policy and research resource for visionary social justice movements for over four decades—from the anti-war and civil rights movements in the 1960s to the peace and global justice movements of the last decade. Some of the greatest progressive minds of the 20th and 21st centuries have found a home at IPS, starting with the organization’s founders, Richard Barnet and Marcus Raskin. IPS scholars have included such luminaries as Arthur Waskow, Gar Alperovitz, Saul Landau, Bob Moses, Rita Mae Brown, Barbara Ehrenreich, Roger Wilkins and Orlando Letelier. Today the Institute’s work is organized into more than a dozen projects, reflecting our public scholars’ diverse areas of expertise.

The Black Worker Initiative is a bold and exciting new effort launched by the Institute for Policy Studies, which is deeply committed to helping achieve both the historic and contemporary aims of the labor and civil rights movements. Black workers have been particularly hard hit by the rising tide of inequality in today’s economy. We hope our Initiative will be a part of the solution to helping expand opportunities for black worker organizing and thereby greatly aid the revitalization of the U.S. labor movement as a whole. Indeed, the Initiative operates under the belief that black workers hold a key role in union revitalization. Without a platform for their voices and perspectives, a vital piece of the progressive movement is absent from the greater public discourse on race and economic and social justice. The Initiative seeks to be a forum for these important conversations, allowing relationships, ideas, and projects to develop. The Initiative will use conferences, published reports, public education materials, and mainstream and social media in framing a road map to how black worker organizing can be an ongoing vehicle for the preservation of the labor movement and the promotion of civil rights and racial and economic justice.

Contents

Foreword by The Honorable Donna F. Edwards, United States House of Representatives	1
Introduction: A Labor of Love	4
Voices Leadership: Let Leaders Lead	9
Power Organizing Black Women: Labor's Lowest Hanging Fruit	47
Promise Policy: Making Work Pay for Black Working Women	89
Into Daybreak: Recommendations	134
Insert: National Survey of Black Women in Labor	

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Why Black Women Need Unions, Why Unions Need Black Women

Foreword by The Honorable Donna F. Edwards,
United States House of Representatives

Black women in America work. *Hard.* Yet our hard work has too often been exploited and unrecognized, with tremendous consequences for families that rely on the income of black women, who are three times more likely than white women to be single heads of households with children under the age of 18.

And despite the fact that black women lead all women in labor force participation—even while mothers of small children—their hard work does not pay. Black women earn just 64 cents on every dollar earned by white men; and are underrepresented in fields that pay family-supporting wages.

In the public sector, a segment of our economy where black women once fared relatively better, the effects of the Great Recession have been particularly devastating. Prior to the economic downturn, the wage gap between black and

white workers was less in the public sector than in the overall economy. These jobs greatly contributed to building the black middle class. But the disproportionate share of women and African Americans working in state and local governments translated into higher rates of job loss for both groups in these sectors during the recession, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

Perhaps because of these systemic and structural gender- and race-based economic traps, black working women have turned to the power of labor unions to escape poverty and workplace discrimination. In 2014, black women (13.5 percent) were only second to black men (15.8 percent) in having the highest union representation rate compared with other race or gender groups. This reality is not accidental. As reported by the Black Women's Roundtable in its *Black Women in the United States, 2014: Progress and Challenges* report, black women who work

under collective bargaining agreements earn higher wages and enjoy greater access to benefits than women of all races and ethnicities who are not unionized. In fact, for black women who are low-wage earners, union membership was a greater factor than education in determining increased wages and benefits.

While black women's high union membership rate is little known, an even more important fact has gone virtually unnoticed by the labor movement and the broader progressive community: the success of black women and other women of color as union organizers. In the groundbreaking 2007 article *Race, Gender, and the Rebirth of Trade Unionism*, by Kate Bronfenbrenner and Dorian Warren, extensive research of National Labor Relations Board data on union elections revealed that women of color have the highest election win rates among all demographic groups. Researchers found that "units with a majority white men have the lowest win rates (35 percent) compared to units that are majority women of color (82 percent)." And victory margins are even greater—an astounding 89 percent—when the lead organizer is a woman of color in units with over 75 percent women of color.

Traditionally such expertise, acumen and track records of success are rewarded with agenda-setting leadership opportunities. Yet black women's organizing achievements have not translated into proportionate leadership within the labor and women's movements or in civil rights and economic justice organizations.

The invisibility of black women's labor leadership not only is of consequence to African Americans, but it is significant in light of shifting national population demographics. Other important factors that support the need to build on black women's emerging leadership are the rapid decline of union density and the related rise of income inequality; retirement insecurity; and high poverty rates and other economic indicators. Learning more about how black women lead in the labor movement is one step toward mining and leveraging black women's labor organizing success for the advancement of workers' rights, which is of critical importance to sustaining America's middle-class and working-class families.

In much the same way as the victories of the civil rights movement greatly benefitted white women and other marginalized Americans, the leadership of black women can and should be brought to bear in advancing economic policies of importance to all working families—including paid sick and family leave, pay equity, and living wages.

And Still I Rise is proof that it is time for the story about black women in America to be rewritten. The insights, admonitions, affections, disappointments and aspirations expressed by the 27 black labor women in this report should not be taken lightly. They are critical pieces of a playbook for saving and restoring the labor movement and strengthening African American and working-class families across our nation.

Still I Rise

Maya Angelou, 1928–2014

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Maya Angelou, *Still I Rise*

Introduction: A Labor of Love

By Kimberly Freeman Brown and Marc Bayard

After spending over 25 combined years promoting the trade union movement and protecting the right to organize in the United States and around the world, we see this report as a love letter of sorts.

First and foremost, it is a love letter to the black labor women within these pages and to their sisters all over the nation who do not yet have unions. They are the grandmothers and mothers who sit regally in church pews each Sunday and invisibly clean homes Monday through Saturday. They are our Southern aunts; our African, Afro-Latina and Caribbean-born sisters and cousins who work hard on the job and harder at home to make sure that their children's dreams are less deferred than their own. And they are tried and tested labor activists who break down barriers and work to build a better economy for each other and for all workers as rank-and-file members, shop stewards, organizers, elected labor officials, and leaders of worker centers and member organizations for workers who are outside of labor law protections.

The roles they play in their families and communities, on the job and in their unions are acts of resistance against everything that African Americans are up against. The statistics on African American wealth and wage inequality, unemployment, mass incarceration, police brutality and poverty are daunting. The black

community's hard-fought social and economic gains are quickly being rolled back as structural inequality grows—not only threatening African Americans, but the equality and democracy of U.S. residents more broadly.

It is our heartfelt desire that this report reminds black women, and shows others the power of black women to make a way out of no way and rise above these barriers that stand between them and true economic and social justice.

Second, this report is our love letter to the labor movement—offering sometimes tough, but always unflappable affection. We know what some may have forgotten. That if you are concerned about the economic advancement of black women, families and communities, you must think twice before you dismiss the value and importance of the labor movement. No question about it, the fact that black women covered by collective bargaining agreements fare better than their counterparts without one makes unions worth fighting for.

Many of our years working within the labor movement have been spent convincing people—policymakers, progressive friends, and disillusioned black workers—of labor's virtue. For some, personal experiences or second-hand knowledge of racism and sexism within unions has been enough to cause them to back away.

Others, especially young people, are ambivalent because they do not know people who belong to unions.

And all too often, policy strategies by civil rights, women's and progressive organizations to address economic issues facing African Americans and all working families do not include organizing workers into unions as part of the solution.

In many ways, these realities bear witness to the distance labor still has to go in finding authentic ways to root out persistent discrimination and inequality within and to build true partnerships outside of itself. We believe that the multifaceted nature of black women's identity, their expertise as activists and organizers, and the urgency of their economic reality places them in the perfect position to lead new efforts to make these connections real, lasting, and capable of producing winning results.

Despite the tremendous potential of widening leadership opportunities for black women, one of the biggest challenges of this project has been convincing potential supporters of the value of focusing on black women. "Why not women of color or all women?" was a common question we were asked over and over again. Sadly, the question reinforces an often unconscious, but deeply held and historic belief that the experiences of black women are not important enough unless attached to others.

Rising above these questions, we decided to focus on black women because we know that they are, and have always been, "the miner's canary" for workers in America. Black women have experienced for decades many of the economic and social ills now faced by others. Therefore, it stands to logic that making black women whole

raises the floor for all women—likely, for all workers.

The idea for this report emerged in October 2013 when the Black Labor Scholars Network (now the Institute for Policy Studies' Black Worker Initiative) and Georgetown University's Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor hosted a two-day conference titled *The State of the Black Worker in America*. This event delved deeply into the history of black workers and their organizing efforts; the current state and vision of black leadership within unions; innovative and cutting edge black-led organizing across the country; and a gender-based analysis of black organizing.

Little-known, groundbreaking research about the effectiveness of black women's leadership in union organizing created a lot of buzz at the conference and begged an important question: Why has the organizing success of black women not resulted in more black women serving in leadership positions that help shape the direction of the labor movement? We hit the road in search of an answer. In our travels from the West Coast to the Deep South, we heard amazing stories from incomparable women.

And Still I Rise: Black Women Labor Leaders' Voices, Power and Promise gives the 27 amazing women we interviewed and the 467 who responded to the Institute for Policy Studies' *National Survey of Black Women in Labor* an opportunity to not only explore this question for themselves but, more important, to show the labor movement a way forward. The report is organized around three emerging themes—leadership, organizing and policy issues of concern to black labor women—and reflects the women's unique position at the nexus of race,

gender and class. More than giving a critique of what is wrong, the women offer insights into winning organizing strategies, ways to build power by linking arms with others, the value of opening opportunity to black women in nontraditional fields; and what happens when white allies use their position and power to make room for the leadership of black women to emerge.

These topics are explored through first-person narratives of the women we interviewed and a summary of the national online survey

results. The report concludes with a series of recommendations to move the ideas within these pages to action.

It is our sincerest hope that this report is received in the spirit with which it was written—as a call for labor to invest more in what the women say that unions have done right. For it will be these actions, matched with the tenacity and passion of black women for building a better world, that will allow all of us to declare Maya Angelou’s immortal words, “Still I Rise.”

Kimberly Freeman Brown

Marc Bayard



Voices

[leadership]

*Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.*

I rise

I rise

I rise.

Maya Angelou, *Still I Rise*

Let Leaders Lead

Utilizing black women's acumen and expertise to advance the labor movement and the African American community

African American women are the most underutilized leadership resource in the U.S. labor movement despite the fact that they belong to unions at higher rates than all other women.

The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reports that in 2014 black women accounted for 12.2 percent of union membership compared to 10.1 percent for white women, 8.9 percent for Latinas, and 11.8 percent for Asian women. However, in no union are the leadership demographics for black women representative of the union's membership demographics.

Results of the Institute for Policy Studies' *National Survey of Black Women in Labor*, confirm this trend. Of the 467 women who responded to the survey, 89 percent reported being or having once been a union member, staff or leader. And of those women, less than three percent reported holding elected positions, less than five percent reported serving as president of a union or labor organization and less than 20 percent reported holding senior staff positions at a director level or higher.

This leadership gap for black women is a detriment to the growth and survival of unions. According to extensive research of National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections by Cornell University's Kate Bronfenbrenner and

Columbia University's Dorian Warren, the highest win rate, 89 percent, occurs for union elections when women of color comprise a majority of the workforce and when organizers are women of color. Coupled with the aforementioned data on union membership rates, black women are labor's lowest hanging fruit—the workforce most receptive to organizing. However, the limited opportunity for black women to assume influential positions in unions will likely continue to mean that organizing black women—or fully integrating them strategically into political, legislative, corporate and other campaigns—will not be a high priority for the labor movement.

Unfortunately, the underrepresentation of black women in the top ranks of leadership is not an isolated phenomenon in American society. Even when skills, education and other indicators are held constant, black women are often overlooked for opportunities to make or influence the decisions of businesses, government, nonprofits and movements in nearly all sectors of society. According to both the Center for American Progress and Catalyst, African American women occupy 5.3 percent of managerial and professional positions in corporations. Similarly, less than five percent of all nonprofit board directors are women of color. And in the current Congress, women of color make up only 6.2 percent of members.

Even worse, without acknowledgement or apology, these same institutions rely heavily on the labor of black women to get things done.

It is time for things to change. And in some ways, things are changing. The rise of leaders profiled in this report—such as United Steelworkers Assistant Legislative Director Roxanne Brown and Wisconsin Jobs Now Executive Director Jennifer Epps-Addison—is a testament to the new, emerging face of labor that is increasingly young, female, immigrant, and of color. Their achievements and leadership call us to consider how we make room for more Roxannes and Jennifers to rise through the ranks.

We explored with the women profiled in this report several different facets of this question, including whether they saw themselves as leaders; what they need to further develop their leadership; and the barriers that must be removed so that they can innovate, organize and win union elections and better wages, working conditions and benefits for workers and the broader community. From our interviews and the national survey, the following three distinct themes emerged.

First, **black women want to lead.** Regardless of the stage they are at in their careers or their current positions in the workplace and within labor, these women are not shrinking violets. About 65 percent of those who took the national survey stated that they aspire to become a union leader. And their desire to lead does not come from an ego-centered place. Instead, it comes from a deep desire to make sure that the voices, concerns and ideas of those they serve as shop stewards, organizers and labor leaders are heard. For those who have risen up the ranks and now sit at decision-making tables where they are often

the first black woman, or one of few—they see the value in their place not for themselves but for members who look like them. “More black women in leadership positions allows more of a balance when approaching concerns and issues faced by black women, providing a seat at the table that has equal voice as others at the table,” explains a national survey respondent.

And perhaps, this national survey respondent says it best, “The current leadership needs to understand that we are not trying to replace anyone already at the table. We want those already at the table to move over so we have a seat at the table. We recognize the value of working together, creating partnerships and collaborating.”

Second, **the labor movement does not have a leadership development problem** when it comes to black women, it has a leadership opportunity problem. In 2002 the International Labor Organization (ILO) published a report titled, *Promoting Gender Equality: A Resource Kit for Trade Unions*, that found union rules and procedures do not encourage women to take on leadership positions in the United States and throughout the world. For example, nearly 70 percent of the women who responded to the national survey said that unions had invested in their leadership development, but almost 50 percent of them agreed that they felt impeded in utilizing their leadership potential because of a glass ceiling. This suggests a structural issue that leadership training programs alone—regardless of how effective—cannot address. As the ILO report attests, for unions to be credible, women need to be adequately represented and involved at all levels of the union. And as one survey respondent said, “[Labor should make] sure we have the same opportunities as others, who are not black, to job promotion.”

In interview after interview, black women labor leaders acknowledged that white and black men and white women in leadership positions played important roles in their ascent within unions. Replicating this experience is essential. According to findings published by the *Harvard Business Review*, women have mentors at work but they do not have the type of mentors who use their influence to advocate on their behalf for greater opportunity. And those are exactly the types of mentors women need to advance in their careers.

Other women interviewed mentioned the role that training and apprenticeship programs, such as the Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW) program in the building and construction trades industry, have played in opening doors. Expanding leadership development opportunities like these must be matched with expanding opportunities to lead. “Increase leadership roles for black women,” said one national survey respondent. “Create a pipeline to leadership for black women where they can be the decision makers.”

Third, **black women at all levels want greater opportunities for connection and mentorship**—especially to one another. The women we interviewed often spoke of the informal circles of support that they have formed for themselves. They recognize, however, that these unofficial support systems should be complemented by more formal mentorship channels. There is no mystery why mentorship was one of the most commonly mentioned

themes in both the interviews and the national survey. Research shows that mentoring is one of the most important and highly valued aspects of workplace leadership development programs for women in unions. Mentoring in the workplace also tends to lead to more promotions over the course of an employee’s career. Said one national survey respondent, “We need more mentors for women coming up through the ranks. Collectively, we have representation. However, when you break it down, black women are sprinkled here and there. It is important to find a way for women to connect and build each other up in this movement.”

In conclusion, the stories of the women profiled in the leadership section of this report reveal everything that the labor movement has to gain by opening the doors of opportunity wider to black women. From Jennifer Epps-Addison, we learn the value of investing in the leadership development of the membership. From Pierrette Talley we learn that amazing victories can be won when leaders with new perspectives are in place. From Valerie Ervin and Karen Lewis, we learn the importance of leveraging all that is learned in unions for greater opportunities to serve inside and outside of them. And from Dr. Toni Lewis we learn that black women understand the strategic value of union membership and the labor movement as a critical force for the economic and social advancement of their families and communities.

Their stories beg the question: Can labor now see the strategic value of black women?



Clayola Brown

President, A. Philip Randolph Institute | Washington, DC

“And together we nurtured one another.”

The importance of mentoring in shaping young and senior leaders

In 2004, Clayola Brown became the first female president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, the oldest constituency group of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), which has promoted racial equality and economic justice since its founding in 1965. Brown succeeded iconic labor and civil rights leaders Randolph and Bayard Rustin and has skillfully led the organization into the 21st century.

Her lifelong commitment to labor activism began in the early 1960s, when she was just a teenager, in her hometown of Charleston, South Carolina. She and her mother were part of a successful effort to organize the Manhattan Shirt Factory in Charleston. Around that time, there was a huge influx of northern manufacturing companies relocating to the South to take advantage of the low unionization rate in the region. In the 1970s, Brown played a role in organizing employees of textile giant J.P. Stevens & Co. In 1980, after a 17-year struggle, over 3,000 workers won a contract through the newly formed Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. Brown eventually became education director for the union and played a pivotal role in helping its 500,000 members negotiate better contracts. In 1995, the union merged with the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and formed the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE). Brown served on the AFL-CIO Executive Council from 1995 to 2005.

Brown's story highlights her commitment to making room for the next generation of black trade unionists, a passion birthed in her own experience of being nurtured and mentored by her mother and other black women in the labor movement as well as by white union brothers and sisters.

Brown graduated from Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, Florida. She has done post-graduate work at American University, Queens College and York University in New York City.

“I was able to meet some very strong sisters in the movement and together, we nurtured one another. Among us, the mentoring process was one of sharing as opposed to following—and of being there for each other when times got hard and hot. As only those of us who were doing it could understand, we could hold each other up without having to say one spoken word.”

My mother, not one to take orders easily, decided that we were going to do something about the conditions in the textile plants around Charleston. Along with a number of family members, we went looking for jobs where we could earn a living wage as opposed to just a paycheck. My mother managed to get me fired from my first three jobs. She made it clear that I was not defined by the kind of work I did. It was just a job that I was doing. No matter what door I walked in to earn a living, I carried with me the dignity and respect that comes with being a human being. So I got started in organizing, following my mother from place to place to look for good working conditions, good benefits, and a decent wage.

Like me, many black women who were a part of the labor movement carried the culture of our families and communities into our work. The needs of our families made real clear why we had to do what we did. There was a passion that came through our culture. And the labor movement wasn't quite sure what to do with us.

Finding a mentor to help me navigate the labor movement was very high on my priority list. It was always men who helped to mentor me from one spot to the next. And in the beginning it was mostly white men in trade union organizations who came from similar family backgrounds as mine. The white folks were poor too. When poor was for real, it didn't matter what color you were. The only color that ever mattered was the green of the dollar, which all of us were looking for at the end of a good day's work—a fair day's pay.

Later—as was God's will and as luck prevailed—I was able to meet some very strong sisters in the movement and together, we nurtured one another. Among us, the mentoring process was one of sharing as opposed to following—and of being there for each other when times got hard and hot. As only those of us who were doing it could understand, we could hold each other up without having to say one spoken word.

When I became president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute in 2004, we needed to

determine where the organization wanted to go. One of the principles that stuck in my mind most was mentoring young people and giving them opportunities to reverse-mentor us seasoned leaders. I knew that they needed mentorship in addition to labor education and political activism experience. We had to include young people because they see ways to get things done that we don't even think about. The young folks that have been a part the past 10 years have taught the elders so much by finding ways of getting around situations that seemed insurmountable.

Setting the agenda for what's next has been wonderful because the elders sat down and listened to our young folk. We had to be big enough to understand that just because we were older, we did not necessarily have to be leading.

Young women don't want to hear about what used to be and what we did back then. They want to know what we are going to do now. How are we going to prepare for the future? One thing is crystal clear, people know when it is their turn to lead; and people who are in positions need to know when to turn leadership over. What traditionally happens with women is that the turnover becomes more problematic than it ought to be.

Sisters can help one another move to the next spot instead of fighting one another to get to the spot. We are getting better at it, but we should have been way down the road. We know what it is like to lift someone, to pull someone, to support someone. And we have got to be even more committed to that practice.



Roxanne Brown

Assistant Legislative Director, United Steelworkers | Washington, DC

“This is the new face of labor.”

An unexpected advocate for the rights of Steelworkers and all working people

Roxanne Brown is one of four lobbyists in the Legislative Office of the United Steelworkers, where she works to strengthen the rights of workers in industries ranging from education to construction. She focuses on a range of policy and regulatory issues—including defense, the environment and energy—for the international union’s 1.2 million members. Brown advocates on critical legislative and regulatory matters encompassing the domestic pulp and paper, nuclear, shipbuilding, aluminum, cement, and specialty metals industries.

Brown’s work as an advocate and lobbyist is her way of showing her love for fellow union members. In them, she sees her mother and aunts who emigrated from Jamaica and built good lives for themselves and their families with hard work and union jobs. Her pride in representing the interests of her members is matched by the joy she feels when women in the union tell her how glad they are to see her in her role. The time she spends in the field convinces her that more diverse leadership in the labor movement will help accelerate the economic and educational empowerment of all workers.

As a union, we're advocating for the bread-and-butter issues of working people in the United States. It's about wages and retirement security. And as our nation is transitioning to a clean energy economy, much of the work that we're trying to do is to help design good, sensible and reasonable clean energy policies that take my members into account on the industrial side, and in the building and construction trades. We want to ensure that all of us play a role in this new, emerging economy.

How did I get into this line of work? It was a complete fluke. I grew up around unions, but didn't know what they were. I'm from Jamaica. My family settled in New York. The women in my family worked in healthcare and food services. An aunt who worked for the county hospital was a member of the Civil Service Employee Association (CSEA). She would take me to union picnics and union parties, but I had no idea what CSEA was. I just thought it was the hospital party. That was my very first experience with unions.

“This is the new face of labor. We're young, we're women, we're immigrants.”

One of the biggest battles that labor is facing right now is over wages. Women are making only 77 or 78 cents for every dollar that a man makes. For a black woman, it's only 64 cents for every dollar that a white man makes. And for Hispanic women, it's only 56 cents. The labor movement is trying to attain parity. That's the same goal as the women's movement. We have to create that equality across the board. Every wage gap that exists is money that's leaving the pockets of women all over the country. I grew up in a single-family household. My mom was a single mom. Every penny counts when you're a single mom. The labor movement understands that. This is why wage equality has been one of its biggest fights.

I started with the Steelworkers when I was 19 years old. I was attending Howard University and couldn't afford to pay for school anymore and had to leave school. My boyfriend, who later became my husband, gave me a card to a temp agency.

The agency sent me to the Steelworkers to do data entry. My very first day with the Steelworkers, I met a group of legislative interns who were members. That is when I fell in love with my union, because I fell in love with our members. They were nontraditional and diverse. They were from all walks of life. We're the largest union in the paper sector; the oil sector; chemicals and rubber; and the auto industry. We actually have more people working in the auto industry than the United Auto Workers because our members

make the components for automobiles—steel, aluminum, seats, glass and tires—literally everything.

When I got started, our union was headed by George Becker. He and my bosses all made a very conscious effort to invest in me. It was not something they had to do. But they recognized that I was someone who loved the union and had talent. And they decided that it was important to put resources into me. I think that our past and present leadership really thinks long-term. They think about the next generation of leadership for this union, and I am just one of those pieces.

This is the new face of labor. We're young, we're women, and we're immigrants. That has been educational for some of our members—especially those in industrial sectors, such as paper, in rural communities—who aren't often engaged with people who look like me. As an industrial union, most of our members are middle-aged white men.

It is very helpful for the future and growth of our union for our members to be more comfortable with diversity, particularly as more and more public sector workers are organized and we get more nurses, bus drivers, and cab drivers in the fold. For our union to fully move into the 21st century, it needs to be inclusive. I'm part of us moving in that direction.

When I go out and speak to our members and it's in a place where they would never expect to see someone like me—either because I'm a woman or because I'm black—there's always a sister that comes up to me after I finish. She'll say something like, "I didn't know we had people like you working for the Steelworkers. Oh, my gosh! I'm so happy to see you. You make us proud. Keep doing your thing, girl. You are giving me hope." That alone speaks volumes, and it speaks to what needs to happen more and more. It makes me proud that I can have that effect on someone. That's everything to me.

I want young people, people of color, immigrants, and women to know that unions are about power. They are about economic power. They are about educational power—because those wages allow people to send their kids to school. They are about financial power for the future, because a lot of these union jobs have very strong retirement benefits associated with them.

Looking back at my aunt's path, and the path that my mom was able to take as a registered nurse and a member of the nurses' union, I now understand what it meant for their wages. We lived in a one-bedroom apartment with five of us. Because of their union wages, one person got an apartment. Then someone else got an apartment. And then people started buying houses. That's a lot of power right there.

***I fell in love with my union, because
I fell in love with our members.*** ”

Jennifer Epps-Addison

Executive Director, Wisconsin Jobs Now | Milwaukee, Wisconsin

“There’s a huge cultural shift ... when regular folks are empowered to become leaders.”

Leading by developing and following the leadership of workers

Attorney Jennifer Epps-Addison has been an organizer for almost 15 years and has an accomplished history of playing a central role in winning campaigns, such as in-state tuition for children of undocumented parents and paid sick days. As head of Wisconsin Jobs Now, a nonprofit organization committed to tackling income inequality, she led a campaign that helped pass a living wage ordinance through the Milwaukee County Board. In 2013, political commentator Bill Moyers named her an Activist to Watch. She also blogs for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel’s Purple Wisconsin section, which offers views from across the political spectrum.

Epps-Addison loves developing community members into leaders as much as she does winning campaigns. And this could not be more important than in a place like Milwaukee. African American economic progress has faltered as jobs disappeared amid globalization and a shift toward putting corporate profits before people. In 1970, the median African American family income in Milwaukee was 19 percent higher than the national median family income for African Americans. Decades later, there has been almost a complete reversal. According to a recent report from National Public Radio, Milwaukee is one of the worst cities to live in for African Americans. The city has the highest rate of residential segregation in the United States. And Wisconsin is the state with the highest rate of African American male prisoners and the highest achievement gap between African American and white students in the country. Despite these daunting challenges, the members of Wisconsin Jobs Now are standing up and leading change.



RAISE ★ UP

MIKE

“*It was really important to me that we weren’t just putting people in front of the cameras, but we were really deeply investing in their growth and their leadership.*”

I spent most of my organizing career being the only person of color in the room making decisions at the strategy table. So it was really important to me that we weren’t just putting people in front of the cameras, but we were deeply investing in their growth and their leadership. I wanted them to have ownership over the campaigns. That model really has proven itself. One hundred percent of the people in our organizing department are former union members—activists, leaders or workers.

There’s a huge cultural shift when regular folks are empowered to become leaders. It is really instructive for traditional labor organizations that are still struggling to figure out how to diversify their ranks at the top levels of leadership, and then figure out how to help those leaders be successful. Our organization has really built a strong model of doing that.

A lot of times we try to bring campaigns back to our communities from top level strategy meetings, and they’re not excited about them because the focus is on reaching this number or that number, this goal or that goal.

We ran a referendum in the last election around raising the minimum wage to \$10.10 and we got

a lot of pushback from our members who have been leading Fight for \$15, a national campaign aimed at increasing the minimum wage at fast-food restaurants to \$15 an hour. It really struck me when one of our employees—Miss Mary, who is almost in her 60s and works at Popeye’s—said to me, “You know, Jenn, we didn’t join this fight to become less poor; we joined this fight cause we really believe that we’re worth more.”

I thought that was such a powerful statement and a reminder that when you give people an aspiration and keep them engaged, they’re not limited by what those in the political class or organizing elite think is possible. And that’s what moves people. That’s what gets people excited. It’s why we’ve seen such an incredible growth in Fight for \$15. Folks are out in the streets taking direct action, they are really responsible for changing the entire conversation in our country.

If you look at that movement, the majority of those leaders are young people of color. A lot are young women, black women in particular.

Black women are already organizers because of the role that we play in our families and in our communities. That’s exactly the same role that we should be playing in labor and community

organizations. If you look at labor, black women are the ones who are coming in to volunteer for the phone banks. They're the ones who are coming to knock on doors in the neighborhoods during elections. They're the ones who are taking the time out of their schedules to show up at hearings because they affect their lives. Despite all this, they rarely are the ones running for leadership positions, sitting on executive councils, or even applying for the organizing jobs in this industry.

Black women need to trust our leadership abilities. We need support systems and to connect to other black women and other women of color who are trying to make change and create space and access to labor organizations. And we need to challenge ourselves to not just be the workers and the doers, but to actually step out in front and feel empowered as leaders.

It's important to recognize that even as we see labor shifting and transitioning and growing, there is still racism in labor. There are still those unspoken rules and the blacklisting that happens when you are too forthright or push too hard

to open a discussion about race. It is really important to have the ability to identify with folks like you and build some collective voices around the changes, the shifts, and the transitions that need to happen to make labor accessible to everyone.

We need to really demand, as black leaders in labor, some intentional space to discuss things like race. We need to discuss resources that go into our communities; the decision-making around how money is spent; which campaigns we're choosing; and how we're investing and growing the base. All of those things—all of those decisions, those strategic questions—need to be opened up to a wider group of black women who deserve a seat at the table.

It's not just black women's responsibility to address those issues or to figure out the solutions, it is all of labor's collective responsibility. We want to build a stronger union. And if we want to truly build a movement that has the capacity to win in our current climate, it means that black women have to be fully invested in it.

[Black women] need to challenge ourselves to not just be the workers and the doers, but to actually step out in front and feel empowered as leaders. ”



Valerie Ervin

Executive Director, National Participatory Democracy Project, a project of the Working Families Organization; Former Councilmember and President, Montgomery County Council | Silver Spring, Maryland

***“We need to be on the front lines of leadership...
not behind the scenes.”***

From grocery store bagger and single mom to elected official, a former union organizer talks about the power of unions to politicize black women

At 16, Valerie Ervin became a United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) member when her mother—a labor leader in her hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico—signed her up for a job as a bagger at a local grocery store. She became pregnant in her junior year at the University of New Mexico and quit college to work full time. Soon after her son, Solomon, was born, Ervin launched into a successful career as an elected member of UFCW Local 1564’s executive board. She eventually was recruited to become the assistant director of the Women’s Affairs Department at UFCW headquarters in Washington, DC. Ervin went on to work in the organizing departments at both the UFCW and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), and she was a teaching fellow at the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations’ Organizing Institute. Ervin later became a member of the faculty and a dean of the George Meany Center for Labor Studies, which was renamed the National Labor College in 2004.

While teaching organizing at the George Meany Center, Valerie was approached to serve as chief of staff for Montgomery County Councilman George Leventhal. During her tenure, she ran for the school board and won. Soon after, Tom Perez, the current U.S. Secretary of Labor, encouraged her to run for his seat on the county council when he ran for Maryland Attorney General.

Ervin won his seat and served on the council for seven years, including one year as its president, where she worked to effect change for women across the country like her—single, working-class mothers—and their families.

Ervin’s story shows the labor movement’s power to prepare black women for careers in public service—including as elected officials and policymakers.

As a member of the Montgomery County Council, I served to give back in big and small ways by making things better for people, which ruffled a lot of feathers. I was singularly focused on getting things done. People elected me and expected a lot in return. I served as “we.”

We created a summer food program to get children fed who otherwise wouldn't have had anything to eat. And we created the first-ever food recovery program in the country where hospitals and restaurants gave unused food to food banks, churches and shelters. And we

I'm lucky to have become a policymaker. There was no one like me. I've never veered from my roots as a union activist. I grew up in a union. My mother took me to my first meeting. You get a lot, and you have to give just as much. I still carry those ideals and beliefs, and you can't see me without seeing me in that light.

I knew what my constituents were going through. I've lived in subsidized housing. I've been on food stamps. I still have a jar of pennies that I used to have to use for gas money. And I'm not ashamed of it. I know what it's like to rob Peter to pay Paul. When I sit in these decision-making

“*Leaders all over the labor movement need to start looking within—right in their own houses—at women who are shop stewards and organizers. They need to make room for these people.*”

secured access to free breakfasts for over 40,000 children. I'm lucky to have become a policymaker. As a black, single mom and former union member, there was no one like me on the Council.

What it comes down to is the fact that I'm working class. And when I look back on my own family, all I've known is women working. Every woman I knew was a worker. That's not foreign or lost on me. I've spent 30 years digging deep because communities are struggling for economic justice.

rooms, I have a way to connect with the needs of the people, because I've walked in their shoes.

The labor movement isn't getting behind black women enough in their own unions. You're seeing an institution of white and black male leaders of a certain generation. And there is a lot of fear of women who are powerful organizers—a fear of the male structure losing its control. I saw that up close and in person in my local in my 20s. My president actually thought I was going to run against him.

As a result of that fear, male leaders will go outside to get women who weren't coming out of unions. They're not seeing people sitting in their own house as potential leaders who could run and represent large numbers of people.

Too many women never get to see their full potential. Some of the most incredible women saw that there was a ceiling and that they had to go someplace else. That was the experience of a lot of women I knew. I was blown away by the talent of those women, and they left because there was only so far they could go. They were recognized as amazing organizers, but they had to leave unions and go on to do other things.

Leaders all over the labor movement need to start looking within—right in their own houses—at women who are shop stewards and organizers. They need to make room for these people.

Right now, when you talk about unions, people's eyes glaze over because they haven't been organizing at scale for many years. We're in a period where families are suffering and children are suffering because labor stopped organizing.

Most women that I've met got politicized inside trade unions. If there's no place to learn about politics internally and externally, a whole generation of black women won't be connected to that powerful source in unions to speak their truth.

The foot soldiers are black women. We are the foot soldiers. They need to hear that really well. We need to be on the front lines of leadership—on TV, in newspapers. That's where black women's faces belong. Not behind the scenes.

We need to be on the front lines of leadership—on TV, in newspapers. That's where black women's faces belong. Not behind the scenes.

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Arlene Holt Baker

Retired Executive Vice President, American Federation of Labor-
Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) | Washington, DC

“The ceiling is cracking a little, but it is not fully cracked.”

Retired labor leader reflects on her ascendancy and what it will take for other black women to rise into leadership positions

Elected in 2007, Arlene Holt Baker is the first African American to hold the post of executive vice president of the AFL-CIO, one of the three highest offices in the largest federation of unions, which represents 12.5 million workers in the United States. She rose to that position through the ranks of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), serving as an organizer, international union representative and area director in California, where she brought public sector workers into the labor movement.

Baker, a tireless champion for America’s working families, served in a number of positions and capacities at AFSCME and the AFL-CIO throughout her career. She led the AFL-CIO’s Gulf Coast Recovery effort after Hurricane Katrina and has fought for the right to organize; immigrant rights; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights; voting rights; and for the right of union members to participate fully in the democratic process.

Baker’s story reflects on her rise to power and the role that black women can and should play in preserving and advancing the labor movement.



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My ascendancy in so many ways was because of the opportunities that I was able to take advantage of. A key factor was having wonderful mentors and supporters. Mentors were critically important. That support was from my beginning days in the 1980s as an organizer with AFSCME, throughout my career as a labor activist, and later as a labor leader within the AFL-CIO.

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney was a great mentor. He had the vision to understand that it's

movement, but it is an independent constituency group representing black workers. And we could grow, thrive, learn and develop skills.

I believe that the labor movement will grow and will be saved, but it will be dependent on the labor movement joining with other movements that are focused on social and economic justice issues. The labor movement must join with immigrants and their fight. They must join with gays and lesbians in their fight. And they certainly must join with all people of color and women in

“The ceiling is cracking a little, but it is not fully cracked. You can't think your job is done when you have one or two examples of people of color or black women who hold a leadership role or a top staff position.”

important for women to have a voice and a place and to be listened to as equally as men. I also had great African American male mentors and other women whom I admired—women who were sisters and who you could go to at any time and talk to about your frustrations. They would shore you up so that you could make it another day. So, mentorship and a support system within the house of labor was important.

One of the greatest training fields for African Americans to learn and develop their leadership skills was and still is the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. It isn't outside of the traditional

a broader movement for social and economic justice. It's collaboration and movements working together that will ensure that the labor movement will survive.

We really have no choice. The labor movement must survive because without strong worker's unions, we will not be able to maintain democracy as we know it. The truth, as I see it, is that our democracy depends on the survival of the labor movement.

The fact is that currently the most likely group of women who are willing to join a union are

women of color, particularly black women. I don't think black women's leadership has been brought to bear to the level that it should be. But the fault is the labor movement not making sure we have elevated and given women the opportunity to be full participants in organizing strategies and campaigns. You just can't rely on black women to knock on doors. They need to be at the table where the organizing strategies are being developed.

We are aware of black women who have the skills. I believe there are thousands of them that have the skills to be great organizers and strategists. We need to go looking for them; and our unions have to be open to accepting them. They exist today in workplaces, on college campuses, and in the private sector, and in the public sector, and in the nonprofit world. They exist.

I think what labor is beginning to do right is make more opportunity available to people of color. There's more access to the labor movement in different roles — whether they're elected positions or opportunities to have professional positions. What we haven't done enough of is reach out far enough or wide enough. We've got

to really make it evident that there is opportunity within the labor movement for all people to ascend to elected positions, as well as the staff positions. We just haven't done that well enough.

There have been breakthroughs. The ceiling is cracking a little, but it is not fully cracked. You can't think your job is done when you have one or two examples of people of color or black women who hold a leadership role or a top staff position. It is not good enough to have one or two examples. There has to be multiple examples of that. What we've done right is we've opened up the doors. And where we've probably got a lot of work to do is in retention and having people feel that they are totally a part of the team.

When people of color get the opportunity to be leaders, we have a responsibility to fight with everything within us to bring others along. We cannot, once we get in the door, close the door behind us. We've got to make darn sure that the door is not just cracked but is opened wide for others to come in. And if it's not open wide, then we have to be part of a movement that says, "We'll have to knock it down so that we can save our movement."



Karen Lewis

President, Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) | Chicago, Illinois

***“If we’re waiting for somebody to just let us in,
we’ll be knocking on doors forever.”***

Chicago Teachers Union President offers words of advice for getting to the top

Karen Lewis taught high school chemistry in Chicago Public Schools for 22 years and has been a proud member of the CTU since 1988. Her commitment to education resulted in her election as president of the 30,000-member union in 2010. Her goal is to improve Chicago Public Schools and stand firmly against the privatization of public education. She believes that students, parents, teachers and community members are educators’ natural allies.

Lewis successfully led a nine-day strike against the Chicago Board of Education in 2012. The CTU negotiated and won higher wages, enhanced teacher training opportunities and ensured that the board would hire more than 500 new teachers. Two years later, Lewis explored the possibility of running for mayor of Chicago. Early polls showed that she was well positioned to win, and Chicago newspapers called her a “formidable challenger.” But a brain tumor forced Lewis out of the race. The fiery and charismatic union leader is now focusing on her health and on her leadership role at CTU.

Lewis is a product of Chicago Public Schools. She attended Kozminski Elementary School and Kenwood High School. She then enrolled at Mount Holyoke College and transferred to Dartmouth College where she earned a sociology and music degree. She was the only African American woman in the class of 1974. Lewis comes from a family of educators: her father, mother and husband, John Lewis, were all Chicago Public School teachers.

For black women to be well represented within labor leadership, it will take people taking black women seriously.

Part of the problem is that you have a movement that's dominated by working-class white men who already feel pressure and already feel like everything's been taken away from them. I mean, the latest study I know of on women leaders in unions shows that in no case does the number of women in leadership correspond to the number of women in membership. Then you add this layer of, "Oh, I've got to let in

First of all, the labor movement has to encourage black women to move up the ranks. They have to develop their leadership levels and be willing to allow them to run for office. And for that we need mentorship. All research on mentorship shows that employees who have mentors are usually more likely to believe that they will advance in their career—and they receive more promotions and higher salaries. But, in labor, we don't have formalized mentoring.

Mentoring is important because there are so many things you cannot prepare for. People can

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It's also important to realize that we have to build layers of leaders by continuing to work with the rank-and-file. We've got to bring them up and move them along.

somebody else who I don't know, I don't trust, doesn't look like me, doesn't deal like me, and doesn't respond like me.” So for black women, the question becomes, “How do I insert myself into those conversations?” And if we're waiting for somebody to just let us in, we'll be knocking on doors forever.

I think the issue is how to assert yourself appropriately. How do you appeal to the rank-and-file so that you can win elected office? That's what needs to be done. Those are the skill sets that can be learned. They are not intuitive.

tell you things. You can read it in a book. You can do a lot of things. But in order to know how to navigate relationships, mentoring is important.

And it's not just about building relationships; it's about building skills. When you have that combination, it's amazing.

I know the importance of mentorship from experience. The problem is that there are so few women in labor leadership. So we don't tend to help each other because we're so busy.

Mentoring is important because there are so many things you cannot prepare for.

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That’s one of the things we have to figure out—how to make time to have that interaction. It would be nice if we got together. It’s also important to realize that we have to build layers of leaders by continuing to work with the rank-and-file. We’ve got to bring them up and move them along.

Black women and other women of color have to move in this direction. We’ve been moving in this direction since slavery. Let’s be honest. And we have to remember to keep our sisters with us; and our brothers, too. We have to find ways to continually integrate that make us stronger.

Also, black women have to stop thinking that we have to do it all ourselves. That’s one of the hardest parts of leadership. As a woman, you have a family and all these other things that you’ve got to do. You have things that you’re responsible for and you have to understand that you don’t have to take all of this on all by yourself. You’ve got to learn to delegate and learn how to let some things go. That’s hard for us in a way, but I think that’s the only way to make the movement more vibrant and continue to bring more people in.



Dr. L. Toni Lewis

Chair, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Healthcare | New York, New York

“Allow them to do the work.”

A call for representative leadership and giving successful black women organizers the chance to lead

Dr. L. Toni Lewis has a lifelong commitment to pursuing social justice, instilled in her by her family and its two-generation legacy of union leadership. A graduate of Georgetown University School of Medicine, she joined the Committee of Interns and Residents (CIR), the largest physician’s union in the SEIU, while completing her medical residency and rose to a number of leadership roles in the union.

From 2007 to 2010, Dr. Lewis served as national president of CIR. There she worked for better hours, pay and benefits for medical residents. In 2010, she was named chair of SEIU Healthcare, which has 1.1 million members. She also serves as an international vice president on the board of SEIU.

Despite her experiences within SEIU, Dr. Lewis acknowledges that many African American women do not have the same opportunity to ascend to leadership positions within unions. Dr. Lewis knows the importance of helping to open leadership opportunities for people of color within the broader labor movement while at the same time working hard for the union she loves.

I was not the first female president, nor was I the first black female president of the doctors' union. However, when you look at some senior staff leadership positions, or the management of the hospitals, or who is making decisions on finances, I see fewer and fewer people who look like me.

I've gone around the country visiting members and different locals. I spend a lot of time talking to women on their way up—millennial women and also seasoned veterans. And I love and respect all the work that they do. Healthcare is a caring service. It can be a ministry to a lot of

very awesome solidarity moment, and then I can have moments when I feel uncomfortable. The source of the discomfort is that I always feel such a deep responsibility to all those who worked so hard to make sure that I have an opportunity like this, whether directly or indirectly. And I want to make sure that my voice is always reflective and respectful of their experience. So, I would love to see leadership be more uniform, more reflective of our membership, and this country.

I wish leadership was a merit-based, talent-based, soul-based system where the minute we identify leadership promise, that person becomes a leader.

“Numbers don't lie. Winning is winning. So we have to get in there and make sure that we learn from black women organizers and allow them to do the work.”

folks. You're with people in their most intimate times of life—death, cancer, birth of their first child. A lot of times, the doctors, nurses, home-care workers and healthcare workers that I serve are more often thinking about their patients.

Hanging out with the home-care workers was the best thing in the world for me. They are the women of color who take care of you in your home and in nursing homes. There is a pride and a kinship that we felt. Then I go to governance meetings, and it can be night and day what the rooms are like. And I can tell you, I can have a

But it doesn't work that way. Not only can it be more difficult for black women and men, it sometimes can even send you out of the union that you love so much. So the first thing we have to do, just to be a little bit of a doctor here, is acknowledge we have a problem. We're not in a post-racial union society. There are several talented people that we're missing out on just because we have a structure that doesn't acknowledge, feed, nourish, and open up the space for that leadership to grow. So we need to acknowledge that we have a problem and build in more mechanisms to identify that talent

We have to collectively go get those winning organizers and immediately move them into positions of strategy and power.

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and create the space where black leaders are safe to grow.

If we don't do something differently as a labor movement, we won't be here. This labor movement, this power, will not be there for our children and our children's children.

I talk to my mom all the time about what it was like to have me during really tough times. I was born before she got the union job. She tells me she had a jar of coins that were saved up so she could afford to get to the hospital when it was time for me to come. She wondered how she could afford to pay those bills. There wouldn't be a Dr. Toni Lewis without her union job, the union family, that collective action and strength. Through that union job, she had a group of people around her to empower her. And the job gave me the opportunity to go to school in Washington, DC, hundreds of miles away. For me growing up, it was kind of just the way that

things were—you find your union and you find your family. There's your strength. Looking back, I feel privileged to be working in a union so every family has those opportunities.

The statistics are there showing the ability of black women and other women of color to organize. We have to collectively go get those winning organizers and immediately move them into positions of strategy and power. Make them deciders. Too often in the labor movement you'll see that, despite good results, people will question the competence of black women organizers. How many times have I heard, "Black people just came out to vote," as if when black people win, things happened by accident? But when a white man wins a campaign, it is because of strategy, good organizing and concrete goals. Numbers don't lie. Winning is winning. So we have to get in there and make sure that we learn from black women organizers and allow them to do the work.

Pierrette Talley

Secretary-Treasurer, Ohio American Federation of Labor-Congress of
Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) | Columbus, Ohio

“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.



“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 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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Power

[organizing]

Did you want to see me broken?

Bowed head and lowered eyes?

Shoulders falling down like teardrops,

Weakened by my soulful cries?

Maya Angelou, *Still I Rise*

Black Women: Labor's Lowest Hanging Fruit

Exploring the impact of allowing black women to innovate, organize and win

Successfully organizing black women workers—particularly in economic sectors such as teaching, nursing and customer service where they are concentrated—could mean significant growth in both union density and in economic stability for black women and families.

For generations, the black community has recognized the benefit of union membership as a strategic tool for insulating itself from discrimination in the workplace and as a ladder to equitable pay and fair treatment on the job. For black women, the union advantage is significant. Black women in unions, for example, earn an average of \$21.90 an hour while non-union women earn \$17.04. In addition, more than 72 percent of women in unions have health insurance, while less than 50 percent of non-union black women do.

Coupled with the fact that women of color win 89 percent of union elections when they comprise the majority of the workforce and are led by an organizer who is a woman of color, it becomes clear that black women are the labor movement's "lowest hanging fruit."

Despite this potential, only 27 percent of respondents to the Institute for Policy Studies' *National Survey of Black Women in Labor* believe that their unions are investing sufficient resources

in organizing black women workers. Said one survey respondent, "The labor movement needs facts and figures to assist them in recognizing the power and importance of organizing black women."

Through interviews with *And Still I Rise* participants and the national survey, we explored their thoughts on whether black women want to be organized and whether the same practices used to organize white women would work. Here is what we found.

Black women want to be organized but not taken for granted. In the national survey, we asked respondents if black women workers are or would be receptive to organizing efforts by unions. Of the respondents, 72 percent of union members and 80 percent of labor affiliate respondents answered affirmatively. A number of survey respondents offered suggestions on where to focus investment, most frequently recommending organizing "low-wage private sector workers...because there are lots of black women in these jobs."

While survey respondents and those interviewed believe that black women want to be organized, the subtext of this belief is a caution not to take the black community's support for granted. Although 74 percent of union members surveyed had a positive impression of unions before belonging

to one, one survey respondent warned, “Unions need to reach out more to the black community. In general, blacks who are not affiliated with unions don’t believe they’re effective and don’t trust them. Unions should have a stronger presence in the community—supporting community initiatives, not through money alone but [through] active support.”

Black women want to be organized by black women organizers with leadership skills and authority. Nearly 50 percent of those surveyed have been a union organizer at some point in their careers. Without reservation, the No. 1 recommendation to unions about how to successfully organize black women is to ensure that black women are not only doing the organizing but developing the organizing strategy and leading the campaigns. Said one survey respondent, “[We need to have] visible leadership, not constantly deferring to white men as the authority.”

Being organized by other black women was shorthand for a host of important characteristics that black women organizers embody. First, workers desire organizers and leaders with a shared experience to their own. “[Workers] trust women who have overcome similar obstacles as the women they are trying to organize,” said a survey respondent. “Women who have come from similar backgrounds...will better relate to the workers.”

Second, the presence of black women in leadership positions within unions builds trust in unions. Several survey respondents spoke of the importance of ensuring that workers “see themselves represented in the existing organization.” This recurring theme may suggest that black women workers pay close attention to whether African American women already in unions are respected and given opportunities to

lead. It is likely that workers quickly deduce that a union that esteems and elevates black women within will be more likely to fight for respect, fairness and leadership opportunities for black women in their workplaces. A survey respondent confirmed this notion by noting how important it is for unions to “be explicit about [their] desire to cultivate leadership of black women.”

This need to expand opportunities for black female organizers to lead campaigns reflects broader, long-held needs within the labor movement as it relates to women in organizing. A 2002 report by the International Labor Organization (ILO) titled, *Promoting Gender Equality: A Resource Kit for Trade Unions*, and a 2004 report by the Berger Marks Foundation titled, *Women Organizing Women: How do We Rock the Boat Without Being Thrown Overboard?*, found that unions are not structurally prepared to develop women organizers. Senior female organizers said that unions regard organizers as second-class workers compared to bargaining representatives or other union employees. Within this “second class” category, female organizers are seen as second class to male organizers. This makes it difficult for women to establish themselves as professionals within their field. The research also noted a lack of women organizers within unions leads to a limited ability to build a strong “woman-organizing base.” Perhaps this research has some bearing on both the reason why more resources have not been devoted to organizing black women and the path toward a correction in course.

Black women workers require a specialized form of organizing. Finally, those interviewed and surveyed report that a more nuanced strategy is necessary for organizing black women workers. Only 24 percent of those surveyed believed that the same skills and tactics for organizing white women workers would be effective with black women.

A central difference identified by survey respondents and interview subjects is the need to more explicitly take on the confluence of race and gender when organizing black women workers. “Lead with race and gender in campaign language,” instructed one survey respondent. *And Still I Rise* participants reveal that workers want to know that campaigns will reflect “issues that deeply impact black women more than others.” These issues are not solely the classic “bread-and-butter” economic issues. Respondents call for organizing around “family and community” issues, including such topics as police brutality and mass incarceration.

This strategic focus represents an important departure from the Alinsky organizing model that has dominated labor and community-based organizing for over 50 years. Alinsky style organizing focuses on geographically based, short-term campaigns on winnable issues—usually in the public sphere. But in communities of color—which are increasingly immigrant, young and poor—organizers must be committed to tackling identity-based, structural problems that are at the root of systemic oppression to truly have legitimacy and support.

Further, *And Still I Rise* participants paint a picture of organizing strategies built on gaining the trust of skeptical workers who too often have been on the receiving end of false claims and promises and utter disrespect for their experiences and talents. Trust-based strategies include building a strong and consistent presence in the community; involving workers’ families in the organizing campaign; establishing principles of honesty, transparency and accountability of campaign leaders to workers; and development of messaging that reflects community interests, concerns and language.

Most important, survey respondents and those interviewed identified the importance of letting black women workers help set the agenda and training them to be leaders of the campaign. That includes “allowing them to define what their struggle at work is about; helping them to develop organizing skills...and making them aware of other black women organizers of all stripes who’ve led successfully to change working conditions,” said one survey respondent. Another said it this way, “[Be] there to assist and encourage! [Then] slowly step back and let black women become leaders instead of helpers in the movement.”

These insights are embodied by the women who are profiled in this section of the report. From Sanchioni Butler and Sandra Joyce Bellamy, we learn about the importance of perseverance in organizing in the South—a region that has been a notorious hotbed of anti-union activity. From Sukari Pinnock-Fitts and Natalicia Tracy, we see the value of aligning with black women to build power that can win major political victories. And from Wilna Destin and Erika Glenn-Byam, we see the power of what happens when women take care of other women who look like them. These amazing organizers—whether or not they officially hold the title—are rewriting the rules of organizing in profound ways.

At the end of the day, organizing more black women is about winning. Said one survey respondent, “Winning is important to the African American woman, so it is important that we can achieve positive results as part of a successful organizing campaign.” The goal for the future has to be creating more win-win opportunities for black women and unions by working together to organize our working women.



Sanchioni Butler

Lead Organizer, Nissan Campaign, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW) | Raymond, Mississippi

***“You’ve got to act like you have a union.
You’ve got to own it.”***

What it will take to organize more African American women into unions in the South

Sanchioni Butler began her professional career with the UAW, a 390,000-member union, in 1988 at a Ford Motor parts distribution facility in Dallas. During her time as a member of UAW Local 870, she served on various standing committees and played an integral role in facilitating joint training programs for workers. After attending an organizing training event in 2003, Butler discovered that she had a passion for social and economic justice with an emphasis on human rights and workers’ rights. A year later she began organizing and participating in or leading campaigns in several southern states.

After becoming an international representative in the Organizing Department of the UAW in 2008, Butler relocated to Mississippi, where she serves as lead organizer for the Nissan workers in Canton. Human rights scholar Lance Compa has documented the workers’ contention that the plant is using scare tactics—such as surveillance, interrogations and threats to close down the plant—to block efforts to unionize. But the intimidation does not scare Butler. She is working hard to organize the 4,000 predominantly African American Nissan employees, many of whom are temporary workers, to fight for workplace democracy.

Butler is an executive board member for the Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance; a member of the executive committee for the Jackson, Mississippi, branch of the American Civil Liberties Union; and a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Coalition of Labor Union Women, and the A. Philip Randolph Institute.

For Butler, organizing in the South is not a job, it is God’s work. And her approach is to inspire those she organizes to claim the campaign as their own and run with it. Butler’s story provides great insights into how to turn the tide in the South.

Having unions in a workplace is a good thing for African American women. If there were no unions in these factories, the women would be skipped over. You know how the world can be with women. A lot of people still look at us as second-class citizens. We're still fighting for equality as women, especially black women.

As an organizer, I try to find out a little bit about the workers and what they care about. Most women are passionate about their children. They

today," instead of me saying, "I need you to get out there." They know that they have the ability to make changes. So I feel good about the work.

There have been improvements in labor's willingness to invest in organizing black women in the South. And the investment in black women organizers is really important. Women are the future. We are the backbone of our families, our churches, and our communities. So it's something that is worth investing in. I'm looking forward to what the future holds.

***“A woman has to always stay focused on her purpose. My purpose for being here is about the work. It's about changing lives and helping someone else.*”**

might not have had an education, so they're passionate about paying that opportunity forward for their kids. So I try to help them see that organizing can help them provide for their children.

I share with women that even though there is no union yet, "You've got to act like you have a union. You've got to own it." And they get it. When they tell me about their complaints on the job, I tell them, "You all have to be your co-workers' advocates." And now they're coming together. They've formed a Women's Committee. They go visit the sick. They do fundraisers for one another and collect and deliver canned goods to people who are injured. I'm seeing these women step up to the plate and take ownership. Now they tell me, "We're going out to the plant to leaflet

To organize more black women into unions in the South, it's going to take more newly unionized women speaking publicly about their struggle. If we can bring these stories to other women, we can come together to try to make things better for African American women.

To union leaders and organizers coming to the South, I'd say leave all egos at the door. You can't come to the South with an attitude of, "I'm coming to save someone." You can't be judgmental. You can't be a person who is going to look down or criticize, judge, or have a savior attitude.

Organizers need to listen. You can't just talk about it, you really have to be about it. There's a way that you can show people that you are genuinely

I want a victory at Nissan that opens up the floodgates to even more African American workers being unionized.

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concerned. In our culture, we know when people are not being real. So we've got to have more people in the field who are real and who are compassionate about the people and their needs. When you go into an area, you've got to be willing to really hear what the people are saying and what the people really want. And as long as organizers do those two things, I think people would be open to receiving any help that comes in. That would be a start.

And I would like to see more black leaders emerge. I think that we need to have a gathering of all of the women who organize in the South. I would like to have dialogue and discussions so that we can figure out what works and how to move our work forward.

It's tough, because this is a man's world. I know anything I do, as a woman, I have to fight twice as hard. I have to overdo in order to try to get the respect that a man would. A woman has to always stay focused on her purpose. My purpose for being here is about the work. It's about changing lives and helping someone else.

My work makes me feel like I'm doing something good. I consider myself a labor activist. Everybody has a legacy that they would like to leave behind. I want to lay the groundwork for my daughter and granddaughter, so that other people will pick up the torch and continue. I want a victory at Nissan that opens the floodgates to even more African American workers being unionized.

And it's not about me getting credit for something. At the end of the day, this work is God's work. And it is still a part of the civil rights movement.



Sandra Joyce Bellamy

Communications Workers of America (CWA) Volunteer and T-Mobile Worker
Charleston, South Carolina

“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.

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

“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.”

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?

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.

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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

Lola Smallwood Cuevas

Chair of Coordinating Committee and Former Director,
Los Angeles Black Worker Center (BWC) | Los Angeles, California

“How do black women change the economy so that it works for them?”

Insight on how worker centers and unions are working together to protect
workers and raise standards

Lola Smallwood Cuevas wears many hats. In addition to her role at BWC, she serves as project director at the University of California-Los Angeles Labor Center, where she helps train the labor movement’s next generation of leaders through the African American Union Leadership School (AAULS)—the first such program in California.

Smallwood Cuevas formerly served as the political and community coordinator for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1877. At Local 1877, she was a lead organizer who helped wage a seven-year campaign to successfully organize security officers in 2006 and form Security Officers United (SOULA 2006). Through this work, Smallwood Cuevas helped build a dynamic black community partnership with the largely immigrant union. The black community played a key role in winning that campaign. The group also elected an African American woman as its president.

Smallwood Cuevas co-authored the Labor Center’s publication, Women’s Work: Los Angeles Homecare Workers Revitalize the Labor Movement and penned a chapter in the 2010 book Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities, by the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA.

From Smallwood Cuevas, we learn about the power of partnership between unions and worker centers in tackling issues of wage theft and unemployment. She also shows us that utilizing the organizing prowess of black women and the broader African American community can help build an economy that works for everyone.



“

...it's not that worker centers are all that different from unions, I think the primary goal is the same: to lift up workers, lift up standards, and build relationships and power and voice among workers to challenge some of the conditions.”

When we look at the crisis of employment, it is impossible to disconnect and untangle that from the black female experience. Our role as the heads of households and our role as primary breadwinners historically in our community, make the economy of black women critically important to the economy of the black community overall. So the question of why black women should organize is really about how do black women change the economy so that it works for them?

In the last 25 or 30 years, we have seen the economy as an individual issue. It is as if it is the worker's fault for the way the economy is working because workers aren't working hard enough. But black women's experience absolutely dispels that myth and explodes the lies about what is happening in the workforce. Our experience really points to the fact that women, through a series of regressive policies, have been left behind.

Black women have disproportionately been impacted by the lack of equal pay for equal work—like not granting labor rights to women who provide services in the home, such as

domestic workers. We've been affected by the assault on public sector jobs, vis-à-vis the attack on government. Black women who have been making sure that our government is working—serving as clerks, librarians, as public servants—are no longer workers with the name and title of employee. Now we're independent contractors. We are casual employees or part-time employees, particularly in the retail and customer service sectors where we, as women, are highly represented.

So, the need for black women to organize is really a need to change the black community's economy and our presence in the public sector, in the health care sector, and in the low-wage retail sector. The conditions that exist in those sectors really require us to come together in the ways that we have always traditionally come together. We have to have a shared analysis and also knit together our power to be able to challenge what's happening right now in the economy.

At the BWC, our goal is unionization. We want to see more women and more workers in our community in unions so that they have that binding agreement and a shared seat at the table

with employers to figure out how to make these industries work, and how to make things work for the workers themselves. The role of worker centers is to fight the attack on unions, on American work, on the commitment of being an employee. We're fighting for the right to a job or career that would span a lifetime, and where you would grow in skill, in wages, and have pension benefits.

A lot of what's behind the poverty that is happening in places like Los Angeles, Detroit and Chicago is that the economy is not working for people who work. So worker centers provide community unionism—where communities are standing up and saying, “We believe that workers are a key piece of this economy.” We are reaching those workers who are not in unions. We're reaching workers who are unemployed but want to work, and we bring them to a table with union workers, with workers in really terrible jobs, with part-time workers, and with workers who want to gain access to work. We bring them together to think critically about how we change the nature of work.

At BWC, we're asking, “How do we create access to quality careers? How do we deal with employment exclusion and discrimination that's historic and institutionalized? How do we help

workers in our community overcome real barriers? How do we develop black worker voices?”

What do you do when you're in a job and, let's say, you've done a tremendous amount of work but your employer hasn't paid you? We're working with some restaurants now where workers have not been paid. Even the check-cashing companies won't cash their paychecks because they bounce because employers are not paying them. What do those workers do? They don't have a union. So, that's where the worker center steps in. Our primary role is to protect the rights of workers, to build their leadership, to challenge some of these practices, and to try and raise the standards and the floor across the board. So, it's not that worker centers are all that different from unions, I think the primary goal is the same: to lift up workers, lift up standards, and build relationship and power and voice among workers to challenge some of the conditions.

Increasingly, worker centers and unions are coming together. We're seeing trade unionists and others say, “You know, let's invest time and resources and energy in creating institutions that are not part of the union movement, but are protecting workers and raising the floor across the board.” So, that's been our history, and that's how we see the role of unions and the role of worker centers in the lives of black workers.

...the question of why black women should organize is really about how do black women change the economy so that it works for them?

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John L. Lewis

John L. Lewis
A Biography
Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine

Shanna Peeks

Administrative Assistant to At-Large International Vice President and Director of Organizing, United Mineworkers of America (UMWA) | Triangle, Virginia

“I have to understand what your needs are first, then we can work together.”

Young labor activist reflects on joining labor’s rich legacy and her approach to organizing

Shanna Peeks almost was not a labor activist. After graduating with a degree in social work and psychology from Salisbury University, she found herself at the crossroads of pursuing a graduate degree in social work or finding a job. An aunt who works for the UMWA, a union of nearly 75,000 members, suggested that Peeks fill in for a secretary who was on leave, Peeks took the temporary job and never left. One short-term assignment led to another until she eventually landed her current position in UMWA’s Organizing Department.

The Washington, DC, native started with limited knowledge about unions, but she quickly developed a deep appreciation for UMWA and the labor movement’s rich history—including its involvement in the civil rights movement. Once she learned of the benefits that labor had secured for workers, such as the 40-hour workweek that many take for granted, her interest in staying with UMWA grew.

Today, Peeks proudly works to bring more workers into UMWA. And not all of those workers are mineworkers. In addition to its history of protecting mineworkers who perform some of the most dangerous work in the nation, UMWA also represents healthcare workers, truck drivers, manufacturing workers and public employees across the United States and Canada.

Peeks’ story reminds us of the importance of attracting talented millennials of diverse backgrounds into the labor movement. Doing so must start with making sure that unions and the broader labor movement is more visible in their communities.

Coming up, I didn't really know too much about unions. I'm from Washington, DC. My mom worked for the fire department and so did my grandfather, so I knew about hard work. But as far as unions or the civil rights movement, it's just not something that we talked about at the dinner table.

Even at school, I don't remember unions being a part of the books that we had to read. They just weren't a part of my world. And it's crazy because a lot of the benefits that I have, I didn't even know that they exist because of the labor movement.

problems that our members are having, we pretty much take on that part of it.

You meet a lot of different people. If you have a question about wanting to be a mine worker, this is the department that you would come to first. I get to meet a lot of different people that work in coal mining. And their issues are different than mine. Most of the time, they come from smaller towns and pretty much their whole livelihood is the mine. But we are all still connected.

“ *Because without numbers, you don't have a union.* ”

I didn't come into the union knowing that this was something that I was going to do. I was helping out while they were waiting for their secretary to come back. But as I got more into it and started really researching the history of the Mine Workers, it became something that I really wanted to become a part of. I learned and found out so much about the history of the union and the labor movement—for example UMWA President John L. Lewis and Mother Jones. It was a history that I wanted to be a part of.

I work in the Organizing Department. And to me, it's the heart. Because without numbers, you don't have a union. So being in that department, we try to get more people into the union, and we also try to find out the needs of our members and the things that we can do to help. Any job

We have the international office and we have district offices. And we have leaders in these communities that we train to see what the community needs. It's very important that their needs are first. Sometimes, you want to talk about work, but right now they have to feed their children. So if I feed you, maybe then we can have a discussion about what you want to see at a job. I have to understand what your needs are first, and then we can work together on a common goal that hopefully will benefit your life.

Coal is one aspect of what we do. But we are more than that. We actually represent a lot of people who are not coal miners. We have parole officers. And we have members from the Navaho Nation, which has a number of different lines of work—blue collar and white collar. So I think

if we're trying to organize people who are not coal miners, first it is about education—letting them know that we do represent more than coal miners. Because if a person feels like you can't relate to them, then how are you going to represent them if you don't know their struggle?

So that's the important thing first: to educate them about our history with workers who are not coal miners. Then we go in and make sure that it's something that they really want. A lot of times you might get really mad at your boss on a particular day, and the next week everything's fine. So it's basically trying to figure out if there is really a need and if the whole organization is going to come together and try to form the union.

Once we make our own assessment, then we make house calls and talk to the workers to see how they are being taken advantage of and what their needs and demands are. Once that's done, we try to get them to vote for a union by following the labor laws. And once that's done and we're able to get a contract, that's pretty much how we come in.

What's most important is talking to these communities first. It's hard to try to tell people what they need or what they want if you don't talk to them.



Wilna Destin

Housekeeping Organizer, Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees and Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (UNITE HERE) Local 737 | Orlando, Florida

“Housekeepers have a contract...because I was there.”

New organizer celebrates her wins for immigrant hotel workers in Florida

Wilna Destin's smile says it all. The housekeeper moved to Florida from Haiti looking for a better life. Instead, years after she first moved to the Sunshine State, she found herself working at a Disney World resort for only \$8.70 an hour. That was until she learned about UNITE HERE Local 737, a union that organizes over 14,000 Disney World housekeepers and food and beverage workers to fight for better work contracts.

At first, she was afraid to join the union. But after talking to three different campaign organizers who gained her trust, she conquered the fear of losing her job and started fighting for her right to higher wages and better working conditions. After months of organizing for a better contract, all of the housekeepers who worked for Disney World got an almost immediate raise from \$8.70 an hour to \$9.50 an hour in 2014. Housekeepers with more seniority could earn up to \$15 an hour by 2016.

Destin's advocacy for better working conditions did not end there. Today, Destin is an organizer for Local 737, where she has pushed for improvements for workers at other hotels and tourist attractions. She is driven by her unwavering belief in the power of unions to make life better for working mothers and their families.

I didn't know anything about the union. And when I did hear about the union, I didn't take it seriously. My co-workers said the union wouldn't do anything for me. And I thought, "No. I don't want to do this because I don't want to lose my job. I have two children. And I have family in Haiti to take care of. If I lose my job, it's not going to be easy." But then some people from the union started to come talk to me about the union—what it is and what it's for. I went to a union meeting. And I felt that joining the union and fighting for better working conditions was something I had to do. I thought to myself, "I can do something for

The first time I went to a union campaign, we were in the middle of contract negotiations with Disney. For the first time, the housekeepers were very organized, and we won a lot of stuff for the housekeepers, like better pay and decreased workloads. It was a good contract. The contract negotiations ended on August 1, 2014.

Before the campaign, I was afraid and doubtful. Now I'm not scared anymore. Now I see it's good to organize. For the first time, the Latino and Haitian, and African American housekeepers, cooks, servers and dishwashers who work for

“In the future, we need to organize more black women. Sometimes black women think that unions are not for us. But we can do more. We deserve more. We are hard workers, and we're proud.”

my co-workers and myself. Together we can get a chance to do better.”

Organizing was very important to me as a Haitian woman working in the Disney resort. I saw how they treated people. It's really hard to be a housekeeper. You have a lot of pressure from your boss and manager to clean up to 17 rooms, up to 24 beds, 17 bathtubs, towels and everything. It's a lot of work and a lot of pressure when you're doing housekeeping. That's why I got involved with the union.

Disney World have a good contract because I was there. And we can do more! It's going to be better and better. Finally, I did something. That is what's good about organizing.

I feel so proud because our win goes far beyond the hotel. Right after Disney announced that it would pay workers more, SeaWorld and Universal announced their workers were going to get a raise. It's good when a family can bring in \$20 or \$30 more weekly. I take pride in my organizing work and victories.

It's very important for women to organize women. As an organizer and a mom, I can show you that I know how you feel when you don't have milk or juice for your children. The more we organize, the more we can live a better life.

In the future, we need to organize more black women. Sometimes black women think that unions are not for us. But we can do more. We

deserve more. We are hard workers, and we're proud. We have our families, and we have to support them more. And that's why we need more black women involved in organizing. It's not about being black or white. It's about what the future is going to look like for your children.

I would like to see black women stand up and fight for their rights. We can do it. Together.

Not me or you. Together.

”

Erika Glenn-Byam

Shop Steward and Vice President of the Women's Committee, Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) Local 79 | New York, New York

“We’re here and we’re here to stay.”

Charting a path for women in the building and construction trades

Erika Glenn-Byam loves what she does. She is a construction worker—a job held by less than three percent of women and less than seven percent of African Americans in the United States. She has worked on historic buildings, such as the Plaza Hotel and St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City. Any given day, the young trailblazer might be helping to demolish a building, working with bricklayers as a mason attendant or learning new skills as a general contractor. Glenn-Byam entered the trades with the support of Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW), a nonprofit that has provided training to women who want to pursue a career in the construction, utility, and maintenance trades for nearly four decades. Several unions have agreed to accept the women who go through NEW’s program into multi-year apprenticeships. Glenn-Byam is one of the more than 1,000 women who have gone through the program and attained apprenticeships since 2005. All of them, including Glenn-Byam, can expect to earn between \$35-\$55 per hour plus benefits once they attain journeyman status.

Within Local 79, the native New Yorker practices organizing by mentoring other women who enter the trades and encouraging them to stay. More than half of the women who enter an apprenticeship program in the building trades never finish it. Those who do finish and succeed in their careers often have strong mentors, such as Glenn-Byam, to help them overcome the challenges of thriving in a nontraditional field for women. Glenn-Byam is also vice president of the union’s newly formed Women’s Committee, which hosts outreach events in neighborhoods that help build bonds between union and community members.



After graduating Bishop Loughlin High School in 1999, I went off to the Air Force. I did my tour, came home and just bounced from job to job for a while. Finally, I said to myself, “I need a career. I need something that I want to wake up and do every day—something that I’m going to love.”

Then I thought of NEW. I had tried to get in the program before but didn’t get picked. So I asked myself, “Hey, how many no’s before someone says yes?” I tried NEW again, and this time I was accepted into the program. From then on, I knew I wanted to be a laborer.

Now we have a Women’s Committee. We recently threw a party for kids at a homeless shelter in Brooklyn. We had a fantastic turnout. We were just looking to get involved with the communities and give back. That is our main goal ...and to help push Local 79.

Our local has about 10,000 members, and I would guess that about 200 are women, and about a third of those are black women. A lot of them come talk to me about the trade. And I give them advice: Help the local, give back, attend your shops, attend meetings, go out and volunteer, rally with us, show your face. I tell them all the

“*I’m making the same amount of money as the next man.*”

NEW’s program is pretty interesting. They engage us in different activities to get a feel for each trade. One morning we might learn how to hook up an electrical box. Another morning we might be doing demolition, where you are carrying a 70-pound bucket. NEW works to give women a feel for the trades—to help you understand that there is heavy lifting and ways to handle yourself around the men. NEW is a great experience. It prepares you for this particular career and helps you make sure this is what you want to do.

In the trades, there are not many sisters working with me, but it is getting there. Now I am seeing a lot of sisters coming in from all nationalities. So, it makes me feel a little bit more comfortable. Hey, we’re here and we’re here to stay.

time, “It is not what we can do for you, it is what you can do for us. Just come out and network. It is always about networking.” That is what I tell the apprentices coming behind me.

We get together one-on-one and I talk to them on a really personal level. I tell them how I survived. And I let them know to never let anyone bring you out of character—even though it can be really challenging some days in the field. I’ve encountered ignorance. Sometimes racism. These are the major parts of what’s hard. And looking for a bathroom! We’re supposed to have female bathrooms. And water in the summertime. The rules are there for companies to follow. But it can be a challenge just getting these companies to enforce them.

The biggest issue is finding and keeping childcare. We even have single dads that are taking care of their kids. We're on call almost 24/7. That prohibits a lot of our members from seeking great or good jobs or staying on those jobs. So Local 79, in collaboration with Cornell University, sent out a survey to our members to see how big a problem this is. When the results come out, the union can implement changes. It is a small step, but we are moving forward.

There are positive things that happen in the field, too. You meet some remarkable individuals, some wonderful people. And you will form lifetime friendships with these people.

Organizing as women is important. It is about togetherness and unity and everybody being on the same page. I think that is what moves us. And everybody striving for the same cause. When you are solo, it is no good. Your voice will never be heard! You have to be together as one, a team.

Less than **3%** of women and
Less than **7%** of all African Americans
work in the construction trades

Source: "Employed Person By Detailed Occupation, Sex, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity," Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed March 15, 2015. <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.pdf>.

Sukari Pinnock-Fitts

Former Director of Membership and Organizing,
American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) | Washington, DC

***“Workers don’t organize because they have rights,
workers organize because they want rights. So why don’t
we just organize them?”***

The woman behind the largest union election victory in 70 years
shares her winning organizing strategy

Before becoming an organization development scholar and practitioner, Sukari Pinnock-Fitts was a leader in AFGE, the largest federal employee union in the nation.

Her first win came at age 22, when she successfully organized a unit of 30 black women workers at a service branch of the Internal Revenue Service in Los Angeles where she worked. After a career of organizing federal government workers across the country, Pinnock-Fitts’ skills were put to the test in 2001, when she approached then AFGE President Bobby Harnage about organizing the 45,000 new employees hired by the government as Transportation Security Administration (TSA) workers in response to the tragic September 11th terrorist attacks. In 2011, after 10 years of struggling to organize TSA workers, AFGE finally won the right to formally represent them.

Pinnock-Fitts’ story not only recounts that victory but illustrates the centrality of identity in winning organizing strategies. Lifting up Pinnock-Fitts’ role in that historic win is proof of the expertise of black women as innovative and winning organizing strategists.



The TSA campaign was a long organizing campaign and probably the best experience in my life as an organizer. When President Bush created the agency after the 9/11 tragedy, he said this workforce will not be unionized. It will not have any collective bargaining rights.

At the time, I was director of organizing at AFGE. We knew that if we let that stand in a new agency with 45,000 brand new federal workers, the government would likely want to start rescinding

We knew it was a huge campaign that would take a long time. We wanted to at least organize three of the largest airports first, file the petitions when we got the 30 percent showing of interest, and see whether the Federal Labor Relations Authority—the companion to the National Labor Relations Board in the private sector—would accept the petitions so that we could go forward.

What happened when we filed was just what we expected. They said, “These workers have no collective bargaining rights, so we can’t accept

“Until I won the campaign, they believed that we would never be able to do it. And I don’t know if they would have held that belief had I been a white male.”

rights for other unionized workers. Our fear was that they would say, “See we created TSA and they didn’t have any rights, and everything is fine.”

After some thought about it, I said to the union president, “Workers don’t organize because they have rights, workers organize because they want rights. So why don’t we just organize them and then make the claim for the rights?” He was great. He said, “You know, I don’t see why we shouldn’t. Let’s try.”

your petition.” We went back to the drawing board. But by this time, we were seeing a real interest in unionization among this workforce. Because they did not have any rights, they were being treated atrociously: fired for any reason; fired for no reason; stuck with very bad working conditions; forced to buy their own uniforms. And they were among the lowest-paid federal workers in the country.

At the end of the campaign, we had invested more than \$9 million to organize this workforce.

It took us over nine years to finally have an election, and it took another two years to negotiate a contract. But we won. The union's board kept investing, and we grew the organizing staff. When we started the campaign, we had 23 organizers nationwide. There were 450 airports in the TSA system, and of those 300 were major hubs. Our strategy was, if we could organize the major hub airports and get a "yes" vote, then the "no" votes that were out there in pockets would be overcome. The strategy ultimately worked.

By the end of the campaign, we had a lot of support from our sisters and brothers in other unions. They wore bag tags on their luggage saying "Union Yes." And they'd go through the airports and hand out cards to the TSA employees saying, "Union Yes! You have an election coming up. Vote yes for AFGE."

Initially I had a lot of people saying to me, "You can't do this. AFGE can't do this. You can't do this." Until I won the campaign,

they believed that we would never be able to do it. And I don't know if they would have held that belief had I been a white male.

What labor has to understand is that people want to see themselves in the leadership, in the people talking to them about organizing. The AFL-CIO never paid much attention to that. They tend to take what I call a color-blind approach to organizing work. "Oh, we don't see color."

If you don't see color, you don't see me because my color informs everything I am. I can't live in this country without my color informing every relationship I have and every transaction I have. And when you have leaders at the top of the labor movement who literally don't see us, it's not surprising that union membership is down to 11 percent from 20 percent in 1983. It's because they haven't changed any of the things that they have been doing, despite research that organizing is more effective when organizers reflect the workforce they're organizing.



Natalicia Tracy

Executive Director, Brazilian Immigrant Center (BIC) | Boston, Massachusetts

“I have found my voice and have been able to help others find theirs as well.”

Former domestic worker leads a movement for labor rights and dignity

As a woman who immigrated to Boston from Brazil to work as a nanny when she was just 17, Natalicia Tracy knows the injustices faced by domestic workers who are excluded from federal labor law protections—including the right to collectively bargain. More than 90 percent of the estimated 2 million domestic workers in the United States are women, and a majority are women of color, says Tracy. And according to the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), the nation’s leading voice for domestic workers, by 2025 our nation will need at least 1.8 million additional caregivers to care for aging baby boomers.

Today, Tracy is vice president of the board of directors of the NDWA in addition to her leadership at BIC, which is dedicated to safeguarding the rights of immigrant workers.

A doctoral candidate in sociology at Boston University, Tracy is at the forefront of efforts to ensure that local and national policies protect domestic workers’ labor rights and that domestic workers are embraced as part of the broader labor movement. Tracy played a key role in Massachusetts becoming the fourth state in the nation to enact a Domestic Worker Bill of Rights law. Among other things, the law grants domestic workers the right to maternity leave, overtime pay, and the notification of termination.

At her core, Tracy is an organizer. Her story chronicles the work she does both among domestic workers and within the broader labor movement, which she embraces as an essential partnership for obtaining full labor rights for domestic workers.

“People must realize that all of us, at one point in our lives, are going to need someone to care for us. And usually it’s a domestic worker. And I think that is something that bonds everyone to this. There’s a strong connection and understanding that we are in this together.”

I was 17 when I came to the United States to be a nanny. I was supposed to take care of a child for two years. Very quickly the job wasn’t just that. I worked seven days a week serving breakfast at 6 a.m. and making sure the house was clean. I was also doing the laundry and cooking in addition to taking care of the child, who I loved very much. I had to sleep on a three-season porch with a futon on the floor. And I was getting paid \$25 a week.

Where I was, there was just one way to go, and it was up. So I decided I had to find a way out. And I did.

First, I felt that education would give me the tools and the credibility to do the work. It was hard as a woman of color and as an immigrant who didn’t speak English. You have to work 20 times as hard so people give you a speck of recognition.

Then I found the Brazilian Immigrant Center and I started volunteering there. I eventually became its executive director. I’m truly invested in making sure that everyone who walks through the door feels treated with respect and dignity. What’s missing outside, I want them to feel inside.

At the center, we see a lot of people who have been discriminated against—sometimes just because they are doing low-wage work. It’s outrageous that young women and women of color in this country are treated like slaves where they receive no respect, no dignity or appreciation for anything they do for the most precious possession that one may have—their homes, children, and their elderly parents. Usually we have people who have been really hurt by life, feel marginalized, can’t take it anymore, and feel like they have to do something about what’s happening to them.

We take that as an opportunity to bring them in to work with us. We go into the community and run workshops about workers’ rights and tenants’ rights and they start to come in and say, “Hey, this is happening to me. How can we fix it?” And it’s not about just helping them. It’s to teach and ask them to share what they learn with others.

I feel that I have found my voice, and I have been able to help other women find theirs as well. And I consider myself to be part of the broader labor movement. The labor movement belongs to everyone, and everyone belongs to it. And it

should be a space for people to come together because we all want the same thing.

We want fair pay and living wages so we can provide for our families and for our children. We want opportunities for our children to go to college so that they can become greater than ourselves. We want fairness, respect and dignity at the workplace. And we want to be able to go home feeling respected and appreciated for each hard day of work.

So I think I pushed myself into the labor movement. In Massachusetts, I have to say, I was blown away by the amount of respect and support that we received from labor. We knew our differences, but we also knew how much we could complement each other's strengths. We work well together, and that's why we passed one of the most progressive bills in the country in one legislative session—which is unheard of.

I envision a future where all domestic workers know their rights and understand there are laws to protect their rights. A future where everyone sees his or her job as a real profession

that is valued. It's a space where they are visible, respected and have the dignity and pay that allows them to take care of their families. And my vision for the future is very much intertwined with racial justice. We cannot separate the two of them.

To achieve my dream, we have to start with organizing and then passing laws, because laws are important. Without them it makes it very hard for us to do our work. We also understand that laws are just the beginning of our work. It's really about organizing and educating, so that employers can change the culture—the way we are viewed and the way we are treated.

I feel honored to be a part of a beautiful, growing movement for change. And I want as many people to join me as possible. I don't want them to be afraid because it's a lot easier when you come together, have each other's support, and learn from each other. With that, you can continue to grow, be a role model for your family, and have a new generation of children that won't have to deal with the same issues that you have to deal with right now.

And my vision for the future is very much intertwined with racial justice. We cannot separate the two of them.

”



Robin Williams

Associate Director of Civil Rights and Community Action, United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) | Washington, DC

“I hope labor looks at civil rights through a different lens.”

Connecting to new civil rights leaders could be the path forward for labor

Robin Williams started her career in the labor movement in the late 1990s as an 18-year-old single mother and UFCW member working at a Safeway grocery store in Washington, DC. Always outspoken, she used her boldness—shaped by her southern-minister father who often preached about human rights from the pulpit—to seek promotions and better shifts for fellow grocery store workers. She became a union shop steward and, after leaving Safeway, began organizing nursing home and healthcare workers through the union.

Williams was eventually tapped to join the staff of the civil rights department at the union, where she continues to champion the rights of others on important civil rights and social justice issues ranging from employment discrimination and immigration reform to income inequality and affordable healthcare. She also works to make visible the role Wal-Mart has played in driving down work and pay standards for retail workers across the country. Not only does Williams do this through her union, she is active in other organizations that work for social change. In 2013 Williams formed the National Retail Justice Alliance, a coalition of social justice leaders and policy experts dedicated to building a long-term movement to raise the living and working standards of retail workers in the United States. She also serves on the national board of directors for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Her story shows the connections between labor organizing and civil rights and emphasizes the need for labor to connect more with new civil rights leaders as part of its strategy to revive itself.

I started out at the local union as a shop steward. I became an organizer and then a lead organizer. In organizing, I always looked to the community for help because I feel like the workers are the community.

In the old days, union halls used to be part of the community. That's where you went to have your union meetings, but it was also the place to socialize. So I've always reached out to community partners, leaders in the community and ministers.

And then there's the work that I do around racial justice and civil rights. I was recently in Ferguson, Missouri, talking to the mothers of young black men who face discrimination every day. Hearing real life stories, talking to UFCW members and helping them empower themselves through the political process has opened up a whole new world for me.

I never thought that I would be in a position where I could help to develop strategy and move a platform for justice. I never thought that I

“We don't need a new labor movement, we need to perfect what we already have.”

Then I became the community and political coordinator for my union. And I started doing politics in the Maryland-DC-Virginia-West Virginia area; and doing civil rights work. In 2005, I was asked to come work for the civil rights department at my international union in the position that I'm in now. Being in this position has really opened up a new world for me.

I've met people that I thought I'd never ever sit in the same room with. Women like Dorothy Height. Just being able to have a conversation and ask her questions about the struggle—that was really amazing to me. Just being able to have those conversations about the strategic planning about the movement, the organizing, the struggles, how hard it was, and how they were sacrificing to organize.

would be facing issues that we faced in the 1960s. Never thought that the rate of unemployment would be so high again in the African American community, or that our men would be facing such racial profiling. I never thought I would see this in my time. It's challenging, but it's also exciting. It's exciting to see all the young activists—especially young female activists, black, white, Latina and Asian. The young women are organizing, and it gives me a new energy. It gives me such hope that we can have a new labor movement. We can have a new America. I never dreamed that I would be in such a position. But I also never dreamed that I would meet such awesome young organizers who are coming up with a whole new strategy.

It's always been challenging for the labor movement. Even during the civil rights movement, not all of labor jumped to be a part of securing rights for African Americans. I hope labor looks at civil rights through a different lens. Not one that isolates them, but one that can help to grow our movement. I would hope that labor would be bold enough and courageous enough to sit down with civil rights leaders—the new, young civil rights leaders—and have a discussion about racial justice, criminal justice, and real life issues that people of color face every single day.

Labor is strong. I would hope that labor can look at new leaders and take the opportunity to put them in leadership and have them sitting at the table. We really need to diversify labor, and we cannot wait any longer. We have to diversify—not with people of color only, but with new

thoughts, and being diverse in the ways that we organize and communicate.

My hope is that one day I will have an opportunity to sit at the table, at the highest level of the labor movement. And not just to share my story, but to be heard. To help to speak for every female worker of color out there who struggles every single day to make ends meet. I would hope that I could inspire others to continue in this fight. I don't want to retire without having been able to do all I could to make this movement really great and powerful. And the only way to do that is to empower each other.

I love the labor movement. I'm a labor activist. We can be so much more powerful if we just empower others. We don't need a new labor movement, we need to perfect what we already have.

Promise

[policy issues]

Just like moons and like suns,

With the certainty of tides,

Just like hopes springing high,

Still I rise.

Maya Angelou, *Still I Rise*

Making Work Pay for Black Working Women

Why the economic well-being of black working women
must be the litmus test for economic justice

Black women stand at the center of all that is not working for workers in our current economy. While many of the obstacles that stymie black women's economic advancement are not unique to other women or different groups of workers, the convergence of gender- and race-based inequities compound in ways that leave black women at or near the bottom of nearly every economic indicator. Further, as black women are three times more likely than white women to be single heads of household, their economic insecurity has a direct effect on the economic stability of black children.

Research by National Research Director Linda Burnham of the National Domestic Workers Alliance confirms this reality. In her May 2015 paper, *Gender and the Black Jobs Crisis*, Burnham writes that black working women's economic realities are shaped by a double jeopardy resulting from both women and African Americans being overrepresented in low-wage economic sectors and jobs such as health support, fast food and retail sales. Using 2013 data from the U.S. Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Burnham reports that black women are concentrated in some low-wage jobs at double or triple the rate

of their share of the employed. For example, 61.9 percent of all food preparation and serving workers, which includes fast-food workers, are women who earn a mean annual wage of \$18,000. Despite making up about 13.1 percent of the total number employed, black women represent 20.5 percent of this workforce. Among nursing, psychiatric and home health aides—occupations where women are 88.5 percent of the total number employed—black women represent 35.9 percent of this workforce, which earns a mean annual wage of \$24,700.

While low wages top the list of woes for many black working women, they are at the peak of a very high mountain. In addition to struggling to make ends meet, black working women experience high rates of wage theft; race- and gender-based income inequality; exposure to sexual harassment; unfair work scheduling practices; and limited access to paid leave to care for their sick children, family members or themselves. A 2009 study by the National Employment Law Project, the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment and the Center for Urban Economic Development found that African Americans experience wage theft at more than twice the rate (19.1 percent) of white workers (7.8 percent). In addition,

while female workers in general earn less than white males, the gap is much greater for black women. For African American female restaurant servers, for example, this means that while the average female server loses more than \$320,000 in wages over a lifetime, black female servers lose more than \$400,000.

And Still I Rise participants profiled in this section of the report confirm the accuracy of these statistics. And yet as union members, leaders and labor activists, their stories also speak to the hope and promise of labor organizing as a critical part of the solution.

Without a doubt, black women who belong to unions and are covered by collective bargaining agreements fare better than their non-union counterparts. The benefits of unions continue to hold true for women in low-wage jobs. Black union workers in low-wage jobs earn a median hourly wage of \$15.58, compared to \$12.05 for their non-union counterparts. Additionally, 54.6 percent of black union workers in low-wage jobs have health insurance, compared to 32.6 percent of their non-union counterparts.

The union advantage confirms the importance of organizing more black women into unions and workers' rights organizations as an important strategy for black women's economic advancement—and also for the advancement of economic justice beyond unions. Just as high union density in past decades has raised standards for workers who did not belong to unions, the opposite has proven true. According to a 2012 report by the Economic Policy Institute, declining union density and the weakened power of workers to bargain for higher wages in recent years have contributed to a widening wealth gap between the haves and the have-nots and a widening gap

between increased productivity and the average worker's wage.

Consequently, organizing more workers—especially black working women—into unions is not just a labor issue, it is an economic justice issue with profound implications for advancing progressive economic policies. As a result, protecting black women's right to organize should continue to hold a place at the center of the economic justice agenda of other segments of the progressive community.

On the following pages, *And Still I Rise* participants share their thoughts on the economic policy issues that the labor movement should take up. But other segments of the progressive community should also take note. When asked an open-ended question about the economic issues of concern for black women and the black community that the labor movement should support more rigorously, three themes emerged:

First, black working women want living wages, equal pay and other policies that enable them to be good workers and great mothers. Black union and labor-affiliated women mentioned the need for living wages, equal pay, and an end to income inequality more often than any other economic issues. Often the need for higher wages was placed in the context of black women as heads of the household. The need for childcare was also mentioned with a high degree of frequency. Said one respondent, "Black women usually are the bread winner and the only parent in their homes. I think there needs to be more focus on childcare." Another respondent paired these issues, listing the priorities as "wages, childcare and wage equity." Other issues often mentioned as concerns for working mothers included paid leave to care for sick children,

family and themselves; and the need for fairness in scheduling work hours.

Second, upward mobility issues are of high concern to both black women in unions and labor-affiliated organizations. Among national survey respondents, a quarter of union members and a third of labor-affiliated women identified training and education that fosters career advancement as important. Women spoke to this issue as a need for “more training and workshops to get ahead” and “training more black women to get those higher positions.”

Third, for black working women social justice issues are economic justice issues. *And Still I Rise* participants draw deep, inextricable connections between the economic condition of black women and the social and political condition of black communities. Reflective of the times, criminalization, mass incarceration, and police brutality are issues of paramount concern. Wrote one respondent, “The murder of our sons, the demonization of black men (brothers, husbands, and sons). Labor could support more legislation around these issues.” There was also a strong desire to see the labor movement take up race more explicitly as a part of its economic analysis. One survey respondent called for “a more explicit focus on race and gender as a part of wealth inequality.” Still others called for connections to the black

community and other social movements. Wrote one respondent, “We need to adopt a broader agenda that includes issues of civil rights and our communities.”

The narratives of the women on the following pages give a face and voice to the aforementioned statistics and references. But most important, they give hope of a way forward. From Connie Ogletree, we learn of the plight and promise of organizing low-wage workers. Rachel Bryan embodies what is possible when the doors of opportunity to high-paying professions are opened for women and the formerly incarcerated. And Alicia Garza and Rosalyn Pelles draw clear lines of sight between the labor movement and current social justice movements with an explicit race analysis.

Their stories, and those of the thousands of black working women within and without unions, call for the economic status of black working women and their families to become the litmus test by which we judge the efficacy of our economic justice work. Whether we pursue policies that result in a more equitable distribution of economic benefits from the vantage point of unions, women’s organizations, civil rights groups, or other progressive organizations and coalitions, putting black women’s well-being at the center of our strategies is central to building an economy that truly does work for everyone.



Rachel Bryan

Journeyman Electrician and Community Liaison, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 595 | Dublin, California

“Why not pay a mother like we would pay a man?”

Journeyman electrician on breaking down barriers for women and people of color in the building and construction trades

Before joining the staff of IBEW Local 595 as a community liaison, Rachel Bryan was a journeyman electrician. The young trailblazer started off as a pre-apprentice and then moved on to a five-year apprenticeship program where she was the first pre-apprentice graduate to complete the electrical apprenticeship in Alameda County. During her time as an apprentice, she worked for six different contractors on projects throughout California. Her most memorable project to date, she says, was her work at Eden Medical Center in Castro Valley, California, where she had the opportunity to work with six other women, including a female general foreman who ran the project. The project showed her the importance of having female comrades on the job and made her understand the importance of attracting and retaining women, especially women of color, in the trades and in unions. This directly influences her current work as a community liaison at the IBEW.

Bryan dedicates her time to ensuring that women, people of color and young workers gain access, as she did, to family-supporting careers in the trades. And she works toward getting the trades to fully include these workers who have historically been left out of such career paths.

Bryan is also a committed activist in and outside of her union. She is an active participant and leader in her local labor council, the Electrical Workers Minority Caucus, and the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), where she represents the interests of young people on the Young Workers Advisory Council. She also works closely with numerous community groups and is an active member of her church.

I'm a journeyman electrician with IBEW and currently work for them as a community liaison. Being a journeyman electrician means that I completed five years of training to get state certified to practice as an electrician, installing power systems, lighting systems, heating systems, audio-visual systems, and fire alarms.

I had an interesting path here. For five years, I ran from bad decisions and their consequences. Finally, I saved enough money to get a lawyer, and I turned myself in to the police. I spent 40

I went to a pre-apprenticeship program for sixteen weeks and completed that program. I was their first graduate to complete the five-year electrical apprenticeship in Alameda County. And this program encouraged us to get out to work in union jobs versus non-union jobs. So, I applied to several different trade groups that were union represented, and the electrical trade opened up the fastest.

I tell people my experience doing this work has been 96 percent positive and 4 percent negative.

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My highest hope for the labor movement is for it to be open to all...all races, genders, legal status, and immigration status.

days incarcerated. Upon my release, my lawyer gave me some great constructive criticism and suggested a career in construction. I felt that I was in a situation where I had to think outside of the box. In my area, people that collect trash cannot have a criminal record, which made me feel that job opportunities would be slim to none. So, instead of beating my head against the wall in industries that didn't want me or hadn't carved out space for me, construction was the most viable choice because it was more forgiving and it came with a living wage. I thought if I worked hard I would set myself apart, break down a negative stereotype, and be able to blaze a trail for myself. So, I took my lawyer's advice and did research on how to get into the construction industry.

I've had to endure some situations that were unpleasant. Later in my career, a foreman called me Aunt Jemima because I wore a headscarf. I felt it was a teachable moment. After I documented what happened to me, I felt that I needed to try to win over my brother and say, "Hey, I don't think you really know what you're saying. Let me share with you the historical implications of comments like that, and how they don't have any place on the job site." By the end of the day, he was able to see it my way and apologize. We were able to move on and continue to get this money, because that's the end-goal with this. We're all trying to feed our families. So, I feel like I've won over my brother.

Black women are just looking for opportunity, especially with so many women who are heading

households. We are looking for a chance. People want to feed their families. I mean, it's a big deal.

We're just looking for a chance, and unions are supposed to be that group that does that for you. What unions promote—better wages, better benefits, and retirement—is something anyone wants. And as women of color, we've been held back from those opportunities too long. Women, especially women of color, just want a seat at the table so that we can put food on the table.

When I talk to young adults, I ask them, "Who had two parents in the household?" They say, "No, it was just my mom." And I say, "Was there too much money in the household?" And they say, "No, there were times we struggled."

So, let's turn that on its ear. Why not pay a mother like we would pay a man? She's the head of the household, right? There are so many lives we could change if more money was there. More money, more upward mobility, better benefits, and retirement income. A chance to retire, and retire with dignity.

My highest hope for the labor movement is for it to be open to all, and to really apply what the movement says in its message. You say you're for social justice and social change? Show it. Open your ranks to all—all races, genders, legal status and immigration status. A worker is a worker is a worker. We wouldn't be in this economic downturn if most of the workers were unionized, at all levels. But we have created an "us" and "them" effect. Labor in general was set up to protect the white, male wage. But why not pay us all like that?

For every dollar that a man makes,

Women are making only **78¢**

For a black woman, it's only **64¢**

For Hispanic women, it's only **56¢**

Source: "Employment Fact Sheet: FAQ About the Wage Gap," National Women's Law Center, October 2014.
http://www.nwlc.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/wage_gap_faqs_oct_2014.pdf



Alicia Garza

Co-founder, #BlackLivesMatter; Special Projects Director,
National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) | Oakland, California

“When black people get free, everybody has a chance to get free.”

Workers’ rights activist who co-founded #BlackLivesMatter
offers unions insights from the domestic workers movement

There was a national outcry after George Zimmerman was acquitted in the death of Trayvon Martin and police in Ferguson, Missouri, shot Michael Brown to death. Lesley McSpadden, Michael Brown’s mother and a member of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), called for an investigation of police brutality and harassment in communities of color in the United States. Sybrina Fulton, Trayvon Martin’s mother and an active member of the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), has spent the years after her son’s 2012 death advocating for an end to racial profiling. The night of the Martin verdict, Alicia Garza and two fellow activists created the call to action #BlackLivesMatter, demanding the dismantlement of systemic forms of racism in the country. The project, born of pain and fierce love, has contributed to the growth of 23 Black Lives Matter chapters across the United States, Ghana and Canada. The incredible rise of #BlackLivesMatter is happening as the activist continues to serve as special projects director for NDWA, the nation’s leading advocate for domestic workers. At NDWA, Garza leads the “We Dream in Black” project, which connects domestic workers across the black diaspora, supports their leadership development and cultivates a vision of a new economy and democracy.

Garza’s work—both as a workers’ rights activist and leader of #BlackLivesMatter—perfectly positions her to offer insights into the role that the labor movement can and should play in broader efforts to advance social justice. A brilliant organizer, Garza is innovating by recognizing that winning strategies involve seeing and engaging workers as full human beings with a myriad of identities and issues of concern.

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We're so narrow in our focus in the labor movement. We're just thinking about wages and contracts and benefits and saving the institution. We forget about the people who make the institution what it is.

I consider myself to be a part of the labor movement, but I guess the question is: “Does the labor movement consider me to be a part of it?”

What's so brilliant and valuable about the NDWA is that we organize women at the intersections through a three-dimensional organizing model. Meaning, we don't just organize workers as workers: We organize women, women of color, and immigrant women who are poor, low-income, and working class. We are able to capture a wide range of experiences that really make people feel like this is their movement, and we encourage folks to help shape and lead a movement for all of us.

I guess the other thing that's important to say about whether or not I feel like I'm a part of the labor movement is that historically black women were some of the first workers in this country—both working inside the home and doing really tough labor outside the home, particularly agricultural labor. And so you would think that black women would be core to a vision for a new labor movement that is really rooted and grounded in the experiences of those who are at the margins. That's why I'm so grateful for the

NDWA, and I'm hoping that the rest of the labor movement is able to catch up.

The reason I see my work with the NDWA as so intricately connected with what's happening with #BlackLivesMatter and what happened in Ferguson is that black domestic workers are mothers of children who are being stolen by law enforcement—which is acting as judge, jury and executioner. Black domestic workers are living in communities where black lives are not valued. We are working in economies where black lives are not valued. And we are working in homes where black lives are not valued.

I think that the labor movement is trying to figure out how to relate to black people in this country. In this moment, I have wanted to see the women's movement and the labor movement show up in a different way.

There was a time when black labor was robust and really transformed the landscape of the labor movement in this country. We're working on getting that back. For example, in Ferguson I saw leaders from the Fight for \$15 movement really on the front lines moving labor leaders by saying, “I'm not just a worker. I'm somebody who lives

in this community, who is being targeted by the police all the time—and you have to see that about me.” They’re showing that it’s not just a class issue. It is class, it is race, it is gender, it is geography, it is all of these things that make us who we are. Also state violence, fundamentally, is systemic racism. And that shows up in every aspect of our society—so it’s absolutely a labor issue.

We’re so narrow in our focus in the labor movement. We’re just thinking about wages and contracts and benefits and saving the institution. We forget about the people who make the institution what it is.

I’m incredibly inspired by the folks who are fighting to unionize in places like Mississippi. I’m incredibly inspired by the women who I work with who’ve been fighting to be a part of the labor movement. And I’m inspired by some within the

labor movement who are seeing this moment not as an opportunity to lift their own agenda but as an opportunity to actually help build a movement.

I want to make sure that there are more sisters like me who want to make a change and who are committed to that and are unapologetic about it. It’s long overdue for black women to bring this country to where it’s supposed to be. There are so many valuable experiences that we have to offer that can really shape a better country for everyone. Because when black people get free, everybody has a chance to get free. And so given that, how do we re-orient our movements, our organizations, our homes, our workplaces, and our economies to really value that principle and embody it? That’s the big question that I mull over every single day. I wake up to that question, and I go to sleep thinking about that question.

You would think that black women would be core to a vision for a new labor movement.

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Alice Goff

President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
(AFSCME) Local 3090 | Los Angeles, California

“You have to come up through the ranks.”

Union president reflects on her rise to leadership as a single mom
and charting a pathway to success for other working mothers

Alice Goff represents 5,000 clerical and support service employees in Los Angeles and the Greater Los Angeles region. She also represents 22,000 workers in Southern California’s public sector in her role as president of AFSCME’s District Council 36. In that position, she recommends which political candidates and ballot initiatives the union should endorse.

Under her leadership, Local 3090 has worked to safeguard the rights of victims of domestic violence in the workplace and to pass local policies on pay equity and family leave that helped ensure women’s equal treatment under the law.

Goff remembers the challenges of raising a child as a single mother and balancing that against her talent and desire to be an agent for change for women in the workplace and the broader community. That is why she is so committed to understanding the needs of her members—and their roles in their families—and finding the best ways to develop them as leaders.

Irose through the ranks. I held many different offices in the local before I became president in 1994. I started out as an active member, then a union steward, an area representative, vice president and finally president.

As a rank-and-file member, I started out as a clerk typist. I didn't even know what a union was. But slowly I became more aware and active. Later, I was part of the city's first attempt to turn police officers' jobs—accepting calls from citizens—into civilian jobs. The department didn't have

and challenge and be the President. It doesn't work that way. You have to have some point of reference, some base of experience in order to really be effective. I don't believe you can be an effective leader if you don't know what you're talking about.

You have to have been there and understand the needs and the feelings of the worker—the members in the workplace. You have to understand what their challenges are, what their needs are, and why they make some of

“ *Because women tend to be the nurturers in the home environment, our personal responsibilities may hold us back. So we also have to find a way to help our members through that.*

confidence that civilians would be able to take a call, properly identify what type of crime was in progress, and determine what police service was necessary.

There were 200 of us brought in on the first day. So you can imagine, it was chaotic and there were just a lot of problems in the unit. A friend of mine was very active in the union. She had been part of the drive that organized the clerical unit into AFSCME. Her prodding and encouragement, and giving me assignments here and there, got me started. And once I was in it, I was in it.

If you're going to be in the union, you have to learn all the aspects of it. You don't come in,

the requests that they do. And, similarly, why they don't participate in the union. A person needs to have a full appreciation for the needs of the members and what you may be able to do to bring about changes and make things better.

Members want the local to be responsive to their needs. That's what encourages growth. We have so many challenges. In the public sector we have done well for a long time. But in the last few years, we've been taking the brunt of the criticisms. We're getting the blame for the problems.

Sometimes our members think that we're able to do more than we are able to do because we've been able to do well for such a long time. They

need to have a full appreciation for the union. I think when you can convey that, you get the buy-in, you get the support, and you get the activism.

There has to be openness and encouragement, providing the kinds of training that would make someone feel comfortable to take on the challenge. You can't be effective just by having the title. There's a lot of work to be done, and you have to be willing to do the work.

Then you also have to be equipped to do the work. Training opportunities, those that are specifically for women or are inclusive, can build encouragement and give workers the technical knowledge to function in a position.

We're looking for women of color who don't shy away from responsibility. A lot of black women don't have any problem with taking charge and being the responsible person because of the culture and because their family structure requires it. So I think all of that is there already. We just need to let it out.

Black women just have to be willing to step up. And again, you get there by having a certain confidence level. You get to that level by having been offered the opportunity to train, to learn, and to be mentored.

For some of our members who really have a lot of potential, it really wouldn't take that much work to get those people ready. They in turn, reciprocate. They also want to bring others along. They want to grow the movement.

The only other thing that would stand in their way are personal responsibilities. I am a single parent. My son has come with me to union meetings since he was six months old. And a lot of times, during his adolescent years, he did a lot of homework in the back of the meeting rooms. He was always around the office because I wanted him to be involved. I drove him to all those places. For some kids it works, for some it doesn't. It rubbed off in a good way for him.

Because women tend to be the nurturers in the home environment, our personal responsibilities may hold us back. So we also have to find a way to help our members through that. Not so much now, because our demographics have changed, but we used to sort of have babysitters at the membership meetings so that wouldn't inhibit parents from participating. We have to always look for ways in which we can really get members to be active, to participate.

*You can't be effective just
by having the title.*

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Talisa J. Hardin

Chief Nurse Representative, National Nurses United (NNU),
University of Chicago Medical Center, (UCMC) | Chicago, Illinois

“Every day you get to see that what you do makes a difference.”

Registered nurse and nurses’ union representative on advocating for adequate staffing
and for nurses to stay home when sick

Chicago native Talisa Hardin is a registered nurse who started her career at a non-union hospital, Advocate Christ Medical Center. In 2006, she took a position on the burn unit at UCMC, a union-represented hospital. Hardin graduated from Saint Xavier University with a Bachelor of Science degree in nursing.

Hardin says that she is equally passionate about nursing and her role as one of two chief nurse representatives with the NNU, a union that represents nearly 185,000 registered nurses and organized over 6,500 nurses in 2010, its first year as a union. She advocates for her fellow nurses, organizes other nurses, and serves on the bargaining team. Her passion for both nursing and her union stems from a desire to ensure that her nurses are able to provide the very best care for their patients. She says advocating for appropriate staffing levels is one of the most critical ways to meet this goal.

For workers in helping professions such as nursing, collective bargaining agreements create safe and respectful places for workers to sit down with management and come up with solutions to inefficiencies and workplace practices that could harm both the worker and the patient. Hardin embraces her leadership as an opportunity to effect positive change for her patients and for her colleagues who put patient care above their own needs.

I am a registered nurse, and work in the burn unit at UCMC, which is a special treatment unit. I completely love working there. I've been there for about eight years. The best part about where I work is that we take the journey with the patient. Most nursing units only take care of the patient in phases—either when they are at their sickest, or when they're not as sick and they work to get them to discharge. We get them at their sickest and work with them through the whole cycle. We actually send most of our patients home from our unit. Every day you get to see that what you do makes a difference.

enough nurses to properly take care of patients is our biggest battle all the time.

We're also advocating that nurses should not have to work when they are sick. Hospitals have a business to run, so they make policies that require you to work even when you're sick. If you don't come in, there's trouble. But if nurses come in to work sick, I don't know how well they can care for others who are sick.

I'm one of two chief nurse representatives for NNU at the hospital, so I also advocate for my fellow

“Our biggest issues are staffing and the things that revolve around the day-to-day care of patients.”

My first hospital was not a union hospital. I worked there almost two years and I decided that I needed to change. That's how I ended up going to UCMC, which is a unionized hospital. One of the reasons I was attracted to the hospital had to do with it being a unionized hospital. I didn't know much about unions before working at the UCMC. I just knew that a union was a good thing, and that whenever people join together to work for something good, then good things happen.

We have a lot of things going on at the hospital right now. For nurses, our biggest issues are staffing and the things that revolve around the day-to-day care of patients. Making sure we have

nurses. I don't like to see people treated unfairly. My counterpart is also black, and she was actually serving as a representative before me. She kind of pulled me into it and made me do it.

One of my favorite things to do is talk to nurses. I could probably talk to nurses all day long. Anytime there's a need for organizing, I'm one of the first people to jump up and go. Black women and women of color are good at organizing because we're so passionate. If we really believe in something, then it must be something good and we can get anybody to join up. But in the labor movement in general, there's not a lot of organizing going on. And when you don't see it going on, something is wrong.

As passionate as I am about nursing, I'm also very passionate about the union.

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NNU is doing a lot of organizing. We're going out and we're telling other nurses, "Let's join together and make it better." That's why you see that we're doing so well as far as organizing nurses across the country. I think that the labor movement as a whole doesn't have that passion anymore, and is just not making that effort.

Our team at UCMC is pretty diverse. We have good representation. But when you look at our union as a whole, black women are pretty much missing. There aren't a lot of us.

I tend to be very busy because sometimes it takes a woman of color to actually pull the passion out of another woman of color. We find that we're often going and trying to talk to people and get them to understand why we're doing what we're doing. There just really aren't many of us out there doing the work. Why? I think part of the

problem is we're black women, so we kind of have a double strike and that tends to stifle aspects of our careers. So it takes other black women to lift us up and encourage us to join in.

I do like to consider myself a labor leader. I say all the time, "Oh gosh, how did I end up here?" But I know that I've put in a lot of hours for this, and it takes up a lot of my life. As passionate as I am about nursing, I'm also very passionate about the union. So to say that I'm not a labor leader would be a lie.

I don't ever think about seeing my leadership grow. I think, "What can I do that helps propel us to a better place?" If I do that, then I've done my job. So I've never thought about where I personally want to go, but where I want to see nurses go.

Tyi Jones

Overnight Stock Professional, Club Monaco
Activist, Retail Action Project (RAP) | New York, New York

***“If you present the possibility of things getting better,
everyone is always down for the idea of it.”***

Veteran retail worker shares how the Retail Action Project is helping to educate and organize workers to address scheduling, childcare and discrimination issues

Tyi Jones has been working for more than seven years in retail, a fast-growing and low-wage industry with a significant concentration of black working women. A recent study by progressive think tank Demos projects that there will be 4.1 million American women working in the low-paying retail industry by 2022—a population larger than that of the city of Los Angeles. Jones, who is currently an overnight stock clerk at the clothing store Club Monaco, has worked for some of the best-known brands including American Apparel, Urban Outfitters, Forever 21 and Victoria’s Secret. While the store is closed to customers, Jones does everything from shipping processing and inventory management to folding, maintenance, and refurbishing the floor.

Jones is an active member of member of RAP, a member-based organization founded in 2005 that builds the power of retail workers through leadership training and collective actions. The organization was formed through a community-labor partnership between the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, an affiliate of United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, (RWDSU, UFCW) and the Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES), a neighborhood organization dedicated to community and economic development. By working together, the partnership helped thousands of retail workers win millions of dollars in unpaid wages. RAP and its members are helping to rewrite standards in the retail industry by investing in leadership development and in campaigns to combat wage theft, unfair scheduling and unfair employment credit checks. A RAP study shows that 55 percent of black retail workers and 51 percent of Latino retail workers are part-time workers, compared to 39 percent of white retail workers who are part-time workers.

Jones is focused on educating her fellow retail workers about their rights. In her story, she shares the path that she has taken and what she has learned from RAP.



I got involved with RAP when it launched a campaign against this horrible retailer I worked for. I don't say their name. A co-worker gave me the philosophy of RAP and what it stands for as far as workers' rights, education and activism. From then on, I was down with the cause.

I was down because they are an organization that caters to workers. Even to this day, workers aren't aware that there are organizations that are there to protect and educate them about the

But with erratic scheduling and on-call shifts, you may not know you're working until you're called about two hours prior to your shift. And erratic scheduling isn't an isolated case. According to a report by the City University of New York and RAP, only about 17 percent of retail workers have a set schedule. The rest have to deal with unpredictable hours and on-call shifts on a day-to-day basis. That's totally irrational because it takes about an hour from any borough just to get to the stores in Manhattan. And then you also have to get

“Be very bold in your workplace. It worked for me, and it can definitely open up many more opportunities.”

practices of these businesses that are not always in the best interest of the workers. As workers, we're at the bottom of the totem pole. We are usually told everything is about the business. “Oh, we're sorry, you're fired because it doesn't work for the business.” Or, “Oh, we had to cut your hours because it doesn't work for the business.” But, no one tells you, “We care about you not having a babysitter.” So I was definitely down to spread the word about RAP and let more people know that there's an organization that is there for you and will teach you how to respond in a very active and beneficial way.

A very big issue among workers is erratic scheduling. Some jobs will send out schedules a week in advance, or even a month in advance.

ready. And if you want to make plans, you can't because you might work and you might need a babysitter. All of those things play into scheduling.

Retail workers also face not having enough hours and not having enough money. The RAP report I mentioned previously points out that most retail workers earn less than \$10 an hour; and almost a fifth earn less than \$8 an hour. Full-time work is like a promotion now. Companies are not hiring employees full time. It has to be earned because when you work full time, you get the guaranteed hours and more pay. Part-time status makes it easier for stores to shift workers around. And most part-time employees are black or Latino.

I don't have kids, but I have learned through RAP's different campaigns and the different issues that arise that childcare is a huge problem as far as scheduling and hours. It affects people's lives, especially women, because more than half of low-wage retail workers are female and many times they are the primary caretakers. If you don't have a babysitter, you don't have a job, you don't have money, and you don't have enough hours. It's all a cycle together.

Discrimination issues don't affect me because I don't box myself into that. But I do know that discrimination does exist. I do know women are discriminated against because of their ethnicity and the stereotypes that come along with race—like being an angry black woman. That lingers in someone's mind, especially someone that can't relate to you and doesn't know where you're from. The way that people can discriminate against you can be unconscious, like, "Oh, we have an extra workload but don't ask her, ask this one because her ethnicity is known to be more patient." It leads people toward, against, or around you. I know it can work against people a lot—being black, especially—because that's one of the most misunderstood races in the world.

I think anyone who's exposed to this should definitely look into the Retail Action Project. They're very hands-on with everything they do,

and they welcome feedback, criticism, input and volunteering for all their members and affiliates. There are amazing people. Any question you have about workers' rights, they definitely give you the tools you need to excel and be very bold about approaching a manager or a situation at work. They can also bring you in under the member organizing and training program, which teaches you about labor law and how to organize workers. It's very good.

Workers don't know that they can organize. They don't know what organizing is. They're interested in change, definitely. So, if you present the possibility of things getting better, everyone is always down for the idea of it.

The highest hope I can ever have is for black women in retail, specifically, to not manifest stereotypes. Don't live up to or accept what they want you to be like. Don't ever succumb to it when you're under pressure or you feel like you've been violated or mistreated. There are ways to handle things in a moral, responsible, and ethical way. I would definitely want people to educate themselves and then elevate their minds to carry out any actions that they need to do.

Be very bold in your workplace. It worked for me, and it can definitely open up many more opportunities.

A very big issue among workers is erratic scheduling. ”



Noelle LuSane

Actor and Member, Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television
and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) | New York, New York

***“One day you’re likely going to have to call in the union,
and they’re going to have to fight on your behalf.”***

An actor and mother-to-be shares her perspective on union protection against wage theft
and unfair treatment at work

After earning a master’s degree in Education and Human Development, with a focus on International Education, from the George Washington University, Noelle LuSane pursued a career in foreign affairs on Capitol Hill. She served as an advisor and as staff director of the House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations. Her regional portfolio covered Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and the Middle East and a host of issues including conflict and post-conflict situations, human rights, global health, development, democracy and governance, State Department operations, and international organizations.

In 2010, LuSane left her accomplished foreign affairs career to pursue a lifelong dream of acting. Today, the actress has appeared in national and regional television commercials, theater, and independent film. Her work made her eligible to join SAG-AFTRA—a union that represents more than 160,000 film, television and radio performers, personalities and journalists around the world.

“*For women who need and want to work, and need and want to have a newborn and have some kind of daycare, what options are there? I can imagine scenarios where women have to make the choice between having a child and staying with a job.*”

I’m an actor. For as long as I can remember, this is what I always wanted to do. I’ve been acting for about four years. I did a couple of episodes on a soap opera that opened the door for me to join the union. So in 2012, I became an actor-member of SAG-AFTRA.

Unions weren’t something that I’d given much thought to besides learning about them as part of history in school. And it’s not something that really came up in my work on Capitol Hill. So prior to becoming a member, it’s not something that I really knew much about or had given much thought to.

The benefits are actually great. Prior to becoming a member of the union, I booked a couple of local, regional commercials. And because these commercials were not governed by the union, the contracts were “buyouts”—meaning they could pay you whatever they agreed to, basically. Without a union behind you, you sort of agree to whatever amount they throw at you. I remember this one commercial: We had 12- to 13-hour days and one meal. It was grueling. And at the time, I accepted it as what you have to do.

In contrast, on union commercials that I shoot, there are scheduled breaks after a certain number of hours. You have to have breaks, meals; and if you work over eight hours, you get paid overtime. There are a lot of protections for actors through the union that I didn’t have before I joined. I didn’t even know that I would have been entitled to the protections. That’s just one example.

I had a situation. There was a commercial that I shot. It wasn’t a national commercial, which is easier to track. It was a regional commercial, and it was showing only in the South. I found out it was running a year after we had shot it, and I wasn’t getting residual checks. I ended up getting residuals that I otherwise would not have seen—just because the union went through this process on my behalf. It took a long time, and it’s not something I would have been able to do by myself. In fact, before I called the union, I actually called the production company and the ad agency and nobody returned my phone calls. Nobody wanted to have anything to do with it. But once the union got involved, they had no choice because they would face legal action; and they knew the process. So, something like that could happen.

Unfortunately, there is plenty of non-union work, which means, actors may not be getting compensated adequately for their work. They're working longer hours than they really should be, and they don't have protections for whether they get paid or not. There are a lot of things that can happen. But membership has its privileges, you know, like the American Express card slogan. It just pays to pay dues because one day you're likely going to have to call in the union, and they're going to have to fight on your behalf. So, I'd rather have that in my back pocket.

I'm pregnant, and recently I've been wondering whether I could bring my newborn child onto set if I had to? Because as a working mother in this business, you've got to take work when you can get it. I had an opportunity to be a series regular on a project that shoots in South Africa. My manager and I tried to figure out how I could do it. But because it shoots in South Africa and I'm due at that time, I couldn't do it. But it raises the question: "In that working environment, are any provisions made? Should there be any provisions made?" It's something I haven't looked into, and it makes me want to follow up with SAG-AFTRA and see.

What if you are a series regular who works on a show already and you become pregnant? What are your rights in terms of saying, "No I don't want to take off six months or three months?" Because it would be non-paid most likely, unless you can negotiate some great deal.

For women who need and want to work, and need and want to have a newborn and have some kind of day care, what options are there? I can imagine scenarios where women have to make the choice between having a child and staying with a job.

Obviously your agent would get involved, but I would think that SAG-AFTRA would also get involved. I haven't given it enough thought to think to look into it. But not being a union member, I wouldn't even have to wonder because I'd pretty much be at the behest of the production. Whatever they wanted to do, I could just be left behind.

So to other young women actors, I would say joining a union is worth it. It's an investment. It's sort of like having insurance. You're protected.



Pennie McCoach

Executive board member, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 308
Switchman, Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) | Chicago, Illinois

“I don’t see a lot of us African American women in top officer spots of unions.”

A transit worker and union leader shares her perspective on the challenges facing her industry and the need for unions to diversify leadership

As a single mother, Pennie McCoach was drawn into the transit industry 14 years ago because of the good benefits and pension offered. After encountering racism and sexism on the job, she sought the help of the union and well-organized African American women co-workers, who recruited her into the role of a union steward. Now as a union leader, she opposes the privatization of the CTA, pushed by proponents like Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel. She and her co-workers will have to fight hard to maintain their family-supporting wages and the health of their pension plan in the next round of collective bargaining, given that they are increasingly working side-by-side with workers earning a third of those wages without pensions. At the same time, McCoach sees the low-income African American community in Chicago struggling to get to work as CTA cuts routes on which they rely.

There is a growing trend towards privatization in the transit industry, with detrimental impacts for African American workers who hold those family-supporting jobs and for black communities that rely on public transit to get to work. Public sector jobs like those in transit have long been a source of good jobs for black workers, where wages are higher than in other industries and wage inequality between black and white workers is lower. Black women in particular benefit from public sector jobs. Compared to other industries, the public sector has the highest proportion of black women in the top tier of wages and the lowest proportion of black women in the lowest tier of wages.

McCoach sees what is happening to jobs like hers and knows her co-workers must work together to save what they have. Her story is also evidence that there are black women like her waiting in the wings and ready to lead unions, if only given the opportunity.

I work as personnel in the yard. I put trains together. I troubleshoot and put them into repair shops to be repaired. I didn't think I'd be doing this work, but my son's grandmother used to work in the train yard, and she recommended the job since the benefits were good and there was a pension. I've been there 14 years. Once I got involved with the job, I enjoyed it. I enjoy working with people and helping people.

Public transit is really important here in Chicago. It's affordable, and it's definitely needed in the

These repairmen don't have the pension we have. We also have individuals on our property who are part of a Second Chance program. The mayor pushed for this program to hire individuals with criminal backgrounds. They come in doing the same work as us but making only \$9.25 an hour for work we're doing for \$27 an hour.

The job has transitioned, and we all need to work together no matter what. It has been a challenge, being a black woman and dealing with the male population. Women just recently, in the last 20 years, were able to get into the CTA. I found

***“ Leaders could empower African American women and give them more opportunities to step into leadership.*”**

African American community and in low-income areas. I got very angry when the Transit Authority started to cut routes. When somebody is making \$8.25 an hour, transit is their only way of getting to work. When their route is cut, they have to walk blocks and blocks before they can get a connection.

Our mayor is a strong believer of privatization, and some of our transit system has been privatized. It affects our pensions and our future—having individuals come in and take these jobs at a lower wage. Some of our repairmen have been privatized and now work for a company from New York. The CTA doesn't want to train our repairmen to repair the trains.

that working with a predominantly male population, they're not going to assist you. There were not a lot of African American women doing the job. You got racism and sexism, both -isms. You had to prove yourself—that you're capable of doing the job as well as Caucasian males and males period. When you needed help, the men would leave you alone and let you fend for yourself. That's what made me get involved with the union.

Before I started the job, the ladies before me formed a group called ATU Local 308 Networking Women. They would meet at each lady's house and talk about the issues we face as female employees and African American

employees. By us organizing, it made us stronger. Our issues were heard. If it was just one individual, it would be, “Here she comes complaining again.” But the union helped. Once Networking Women brought their issues to the union, the union supported the issues they had. At the time they had African American males in leadership of the union who supported the group. They had stewards come out and speak to different terminals. We didn’t even have female bathrooms.

I first got involved with the union when two African American female stewards recruited me. They saw me as an outgoing person and said they thought I’d be an asset to the union as an African American female. After six months of seeing what was going on, I saw I needed to get involved. I started attending union meetings and taking steward classes. At the classes, a gentleman encouraged me to run as his assistant as a steward. Now I’m on the executive board of the union.

I don’t see a lot of us African American women in top officer spots of unions. I see a lot of us where I am now. I feel the labor movement can do more. Leaders could empower African American women and give them more opportunities to step into leadership. I still see the union being a dominant male organization, dominated by Caucasian men. It’s 2015. There should changes.

There should be more organizing of black women—making us stronger, more vocal, and more supportive of each other and of the labor movement. Karen Lewis, president of the Chicago Teachers Union, is my idol. She doesn’t mind getting out there and fighting. She doesn’t mind the consequences. She fights for all of us, not just African American women, but for all of us. I’d like to be in a position like that.

There should be more organizing of black women—making us stronger, more vocal, and more supportive of each other and of the labor movement.

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Connie Ogletree

Former Union Representative, National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees (NUHHCE), American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) | Atlanta, Georgia

“My highest aspirations for the workers I organize is for them to realize some of their dreams.”

Former fast-food worker and new union organizer shares the value of a living wage for low-income workers

Connie Ogletree started working at McDonald's in 2012 to support herself and her son after her marriage ended. At first, she was happy to have employment. But she soon realized that she could not make ends meet. Along with most of her co-workers, she earned the federal minimum wage (\$7.25 an hour), had no benefits, and had to receive food stamps to feed her son. After speaking with a representative from Fight for \$15, a national campaign aimed at supporting low-wage workers' efforts to win at least \$15 an hour and a union, she decided to do something for herself and others who were afraid to speak up for themselves. Ogletree began participating in strikes, marches, and other Fight for \$15 events to advocate for a living wage—all while pursuing an associate degree in business administration. After two years of working at McDonald's, she landed a job as a union representative for NUHHCE, where she represented the interests of low-wage hospital employees.

Her saga as a fast-food worker challenges the stereotypes about who these workers are. While most people believe the average fast-food worker is a teenager, 53 percent of all fast-food workers are 21 or older with at least a high school degree, and more than one-fourth are raising a child. Approximately 13 percent of fast-food workers make at or below the federal minimum wage and about 70 percent earn between \$7.25 and \$10.10 an hour (the minimum wage proposed by Congressional Democrats). Given their low salaries, the majority of fast-food workers and their families qualify for public assistance, costing taxpayers an estimated \$7 billion annually.

Ogletree's experience in the fast-food industry gave her insight into the injustices faced by workers and cemented her commitment to organize until low-wage workers can earn at least \$15 an hour.



Once I got married, I stopped working except for temporary or seasonal jobs to pay a bill or buy clothes for my kid or for myself. At one point I was very content being a mother and a homemaker. It was very satisfying to make sure that my husband's clothes were out of the cleaners, his shoes were shining, and he looked fresh when he went to work. I did all of that. I kept the house clean.

I've had two marriages. My first husband was in the U.S. Air Force and we stayed married for

Kreme, Dunkin' Donuts, McDonald's, Wendy's and Captain D's and make our voices heard by chanting: "We cannot survive on \$7.25. Nobody can survive on that little money."

If you work two jobs making \$7.25, and you work 40 hours a week on both jobs, you don't have time for anything else. If not for the people that flip the burgers, mop the floors, clean the windows, and make sure that the score is at least 95 when the health inspector comes, those businesses wouldn't thrive the way that they do.

"We cannot survive on \$7.25. Nobody can survive on that little money."

about 12 years. That husband is deceased now. My second husband will soon be my ex. Once I left him, I had to go back into the workforce in order to continue to feed my son and myself. But I didn't have a stable work background because I'd worked on and off for years, and I didn't have a degree. Most employers want longevity on the job. My son said, "Mommy, why don't you just get a job at McDonald's?" So I went online, applied at McDonald's, got a quick response, and started working with them. I worked with them for two years. Fast food didn't care about my background. And I quickly found out why. It's because they don't care too much about anything. They just want to make the money.

We didn't have a union, but I was very active in all Fight for \$15 protests. We would go to Krispy

After about two months of working at McDonald's, I went back to school. Then I started organizing people in the healthcare industry. They are predominantly African American. You have a lot more women, but there is a significant number of men. Most of the men are older. The younger guys are few and far between.

I would go to different hospitals or nursing homes or rehab centers and talk to people in housekeeping, people who are in the kitchen and in maintenance. I asked them if they are satisfied with the money that they're making. I asked them if they know that people in the North make three or four times the money that they make for the same job. Nine times out of 10, they don't know unless they're from the North or from another part of the country where they had the same type of job.

What made me proud about my work is that I was opening eyes. I was making people aware of information that has always been out there and showing them that they could still be a part of the booming and growing world that we live in. They don't have to sit around and wait on food stamps and a check every two weeks. They can get that check and go to the grocery store and buy groceries with what they make.

When I was introduced to the labor movement and the organizers of the fast-food workers, I immediately wanted to join in because my livelihood was at stake. I was already in school, trying to better myself, but it wasn't moving fast enough. I wanted to jump at anything that I could so that I could make \$15 an hour, stay in school, maybe buy a car, not have to get home at 11

o'clock at night off the bus, and then get back up at four and get back on the bus.

Now I have a brand new car. I offer people rides home from their jobs so that I have an opportunity to talk to them when they're off work. It's just been amazing to me. Like a dream come true.

My highest aspirations for the workers that I organize is for them to realize some of their dreams: to be able to go on a two-week vacation, to put kids through college, to buy their kids some of the fancy stuff that they can't have because they can't afford it. I want them to be able to luxuriate in a hot bath because the kids are out on a play date. Just enjoying the money that they're making.

About **13%** of all fast-food workers make at or below the federal minimum wage and about **70%** make between \$7.25 and \$10.10 an hour.

Source: <http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/fast-food-workers-2013-08.pdf>



Karmen Kareen Parrish

Beverage Supervisor and Activist, Restaurant Opportunities Centers United (ROC)
New Orleans, Louisiana

“That’s all I want. Fairness.”

New Orleans beverage supervisor organizes other restaurant workers for fair wages
and working conditions

Karmen Kareen Parrish began a career as a bartender in the famed party city’s hospitality industry. Today she holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration and licenses in both management and bartending. She puts her education to good use as beverage supervisor for Centerplate, the company that holds the contract to service the Mercedes-Benz Superdome, the Smoothie King Center, Champions Square and other well-known venues in New Orleans.

With more than 13 years of bartending experience, Parrish has seen and experienced the good, the bad and the ugly on the job. She recruits fellow restaurant workers to join the New Orleans chapter of ROC, a national nonprofit organization that supports restaurant workers in gaining their voice and victory over wage theft, discrimination, sexual harassment, and other injustices rampant in the field.

ROC’s work is especially important given the vulnerability of restaurant workers. Nearly 17 percent of restaurant workers live below the poverty line, compared to about 6 percent of workers outside the industry. Women, African American, and Hispanic workers are more likely to fall below the poverty line than all other restaurant workers. African American workers, for example, are more likely to work as cashiers and counter attendants, the lowest-paid occupations in the restaurant industry. In addition, less than 20 percent of all restaurant workers receive employer-provided health insurance and less than 9 percent are included in an employer-provided pension plan. Given the importance of collectively addressing these issues, Parrish has a passion for organizing restaurant workers, especially African Americans and other women of color.

Similar to other women profiled in the report who work and organize outside of unions, Parrish reveals the innovative way that black working women outside of unions are a vital and vibrant part of the labor movement’s present and future.

I'm a beverage supervisor. I do a lot of inventory and make sure that the bartenders are following policy. I love what I do, and I will until I die. It's just that the politics and the behind-the-scenes stuff in this industry get kind of overwhelming.

I have over 13 years of experience bartending in high-paced environments—such as Bourbon Street and the French Quarter. But even after I got my bar management license, it was difficult to get a job in the areas with frequent traffic where

The website talked about sexual harassment and fairness for women of color. I had no choice but to jump on board.

At ROC we push for fairness. You know, that's all I want. Fairness. I don't feel as though I'm owed anything or entitled to anything but a chance at life. Women of color have no chance against a white male. And I think that's unfair. I know many people who aren't of color making well over \$75,000 in these tip positions. These positions are often looked at as something to just get you by

“...if I can make the smallest difference for the next woman of color...then it's all worth it.

I would make money. I thought my education was all I needed, but that wasn't enough. It was very hard for me to get my position. For people of color, their education isn't looked upon as highly as someone else's. And I've still dealt with all of the issues—the pay, the sexual harassment and all of that.

There are a lot of men where I work. Women are a little outnumbered. And the majority of the women are women of color. Being a woman of color, I've had many, many obstacles and detours. But I made it.

I found out about ROC from a work colleague of mine. We got to chitchatting and she heard about my experience and thought ROC would be something I'd want to join. So I Googled it.

while you go through school. But you can actually make a very good living off of tip positions if you're white.

I get an overwhelming response from the women I talk to about ROC. They're on board. They believe in it, and they see that we're all living the same experience. It's nothing new. I can relate to them. That's why they want me to come and tell my story. So I tell my members and potential members that it can be done. When I go to work and I see a bartender or a server or a chef that I know has potential and drive and passion, I'll try to bring them into ROC.

With black women, there's this sense of drive. There's not this sense of entitlement. We know what we need to do, and we know we have to

work harder for it. It's very personal for us. I've done the school thing—higher education, grad school, graduation. I need to get out in the forefront, get my hands dirty, and make it easier for the next person of color.

ROC is not a union. We do advocacy—meaning we offer protection, I guess you could say. It's going to take something short of a miracle to get equal rights for restaurant workers in Louisiana. We're still working on increasing the \$2.13 minimum wage for tipped workers in Louisiana, a wage which has remained the same since 1991. Now a lot of restaurants we have are with ROC.

We have a group of restaurants that offer benefits and higher wages and opportunities for Hispanics to learn English. But it is a very high hurdle that we're working on.

For my members, I want us to do great things. I'd like to make it easier for a person of color. Everyone should have a fair wage to be able to live. That's it. But, sometimes it's hard to get people to get on board because it can seem overwhelming. When I first got involved, I remember thinking, "What am I doing?" But if I can make the smallest difference for the next woman of color, or person of color, then it's all worth it.

Nearly **17%** of all restaurant workers live below the official poverty line.

Only **6.3%** of all workers outside the restaurant industry live below the official poverty line.

Source: "Low Wages and Few Benefits Mean Many Restaurant Workers Can't Make Ends Meet," EPI Report, August 21, 2014, <http://www.epi.org/publication/restaurant-workers/>.



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.

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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.

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Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise.

Maya Angelou, *Still I Rise*

Into Daybreak: Recommendations

And *Still I Rise*, above all else, is a call for greater investment in organizing more black women into unions and community organizations focused on economic justice and workers' rights. While not the whole solution, that call must continue to be a critical component of strategies to advance three important objectives.

First, **organizing more black women into unions will help improve the economic prospects of African American families and communities.** As black women continue to experience the highest union advantage over their non-union counterparts, organizing black women into unions continues to be an effective way for black women to earn higher wages and gain access to benefits such as healthcare and retirement.

Second, **organizing more black women into unions has great potential to contribute to rebuilding and revitalizing the labor movement.** Based on research that shows black women and other women of color have the highest union election win rate among all workers—especially when organized by other women of color—black women are likely the most receptive workers to organizing and the workers most capable of ending organizing campaigns with a victory.

And third, **organizing more black women into unions continues to supply a leadership pipeline capable of uniting the labor, women's, and civil rights movements more effectively around a unified economic justice agenda.**

As the Institute for Policy Studies' *National Survey of Black Women in Labor* shows, more than 65 percent of black labor women believe that their unions invest in their leadership. And from the women profiled in the report, we see the return on this investment as evidenced by the expertise and skill of these women as organizers; important partners and workers' rights champions outside of the traditional labor movement; elected officials and policymakers; and elected leaders and senior staff members within labor unions. Because of their unique position at the nexus of a number of progressive movements, black labor women have the potential to play an even broader role in uniting the labor, civil rights and women's movements in ways that build and aggregate power and accelerate the advancement of a progressive economic policy agenda.

It is with these objectives in mind, that we offer the following recommendations in the areas of leadership, organizing and advancing economic justice policies that benefit black women and working families more broadly.

LEADERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Create a leadership cohort for black labor women** to pursue and achieve their personal and professional development goals through retreats and access to executive coaching.
- **Create a pipeline project for the recruitment of black labor women to key staff positions and boards of directors** of women's groups, civil rights organizations, foundations, labor unions and other progressive organizations. The pipeline project would include, as a core component, racial and gender equity training programs within progressive organizations to help create the climate and culture receptive to greater leadership opportunities for black women.
- **Add resources to existing mentorship programs and create new mentorship opportunities as needed:** (1) to foster greater opportunities for black women to connect and support one another; (2) to foster and encourage those in existing leadership positions within labor to use their positional power to open doors for black women; (3) for black labor women to mentor and support the leadership and professional development of black women outside of the labor movement.
- **Launch a project to position black labor women as thought leaders and strategists** in the media and within progressive spaces where long-term strategies for the advancement of progressive agendas are crafted.

ORGANIZING RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Craft public education strategies that expose black women to labor unions, worker centers and other community-based economic justice organizations** for the purpose of stimulating interest and a demand for more organizing.
- **Create collaborative pilot organizing projects between labor, community groups and women's organizations focused on black women** in support of existing or new organizing campaigns. Such projects would be designed to increase opportunities for black women to lead and shape the projects and to foster greater collaboration among and between these institutions around community interests.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **A series of convenings to build greater mutual support between black women and women's organizations.** These gatherings would be designed to break down barriers to deeper, collaborative work.
- **Creation of a shared women's economic policy agenda among labor, women's organizations and civil rights groups.** In addition to supporting existing efforts among and between these groups, this effort would seek to build bridges between organized labor and young civil rights activists leading efforts around police brutality. These efforts would be led by black labor women.

The Black Worker Initiative of the Institute for Policy Studies
looks forward to continuing to play a role
as convener and “think and action” incubator for work
that allows black labor women to rise, organize and win.



ips-dc.org | and-still-i-rise.org