



# Robin Williams

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***“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

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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.