



# Sanchioni Butler

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***“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.*

**H**aving 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.

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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

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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.