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Whose Crisis Is It Anyway?
Labor Unions Face Major Challenges, Changes

FRANK JOYCE

Unions have been in decline now for at least 30 years. In the private sector, union membership is down to less than 8% of the work force. That's about the same percentage it was in 1900.

But organized labor has a lot of company. Socialism has been in decline. Liberalism has been in decline. Secular Humanism has been in decline. Communism is over with.

So, what's been ascending? Capitalism has nearly total worldwide hegemony. Variations of conservative thought are dominant all over the place. Consumerism is ascendant. Fanatical religion is on the rise, at least in the US and the Middle East. In many parts of the world, corporations enjoy unprecedented loyalty—and/or subservience—from their employees. In the US, torture has more legitimacy than at any time since lynching was widespread. The backlash against the gains of the civil rights movement continues with a vengeance. We all know the list.

Unions Hold Ground Until 1970s

Organized labor is struggling more vigorously these days to find a new way, a means to regain strength for workers and to rebalance social, economic and political power. It's not easy. It's never been easy. The US rests on an economic and legal foundation of chattel slavery. That "DNA" hardly creates a friendly climate for the protection of worker rights.

continued on page two

Inside:
Women and Labor ...................... p.5
Contingent/Day Workers .............. p.6
Resources for Activists .............. p.8
Living Wage Activism ............... p.9
Labor Activism Grants ............... p.12

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Nevertheless, unions achieved growth and power in the United States from the mid-1930s to the mid-1970s. By the early 1970s, however, the convergence of unique forces that had supported union growth began to unravel. The climate that had been temperate turned decidedly frigid.

What was different from 1930s to the 1970s? During the Depression, workers were aroused by abysmal working conditions and poor pay. After World War II, they were agitated by a sense of postwar entitlement in the context of the great wealth they were creating. Workers were restless and militant—their struggles were seen as universally beneficial, and they enjoyed broad public support.

Capitalists believed that unions were preferable to a working class oriented toward Soviet socialism. Were that not the case, the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 might never have passed in the first place. At the same time, mass production was creating a need for mass consumption. Capital thus had its own reasons for increasing the purchasing power of workers. The mid-twentieth century became a period of “primitive consumer accumulation.” Union power was further advanced because industrial production was concentrated—making the strike a very powerful weapon.

Beginning in the 1960s, civil rights, feminist and anti-war movements generated a different kind of social struggle, shifting energy away from the labor movement, but also dominating the attention of labor’s natural enemies. Unions were more or less left alone.

But by the end of the 1970s, all that had changed. Socialism was in rapid decline. Workers had achieved much of the prosperity and respect they sought, as well as the contentment that comes with it. Credit cards and other forms of consumer debt replaced unions as the main means of getting homes, cars, TVs and other “stuff” that defines “middle class.” Increased work time and low prices made possible by low wage foreign production also offset falling and stagnant wages.

**Working in a Global Economy**

Capital had become highly mobile and thus able to chase low wages anywhere on the globe, unfettered by vast populations closed to them by socialist states. Unions were increasingly portrayed and perceived as special interests whose gains came at the expense of other workers or the general public. Multiple production sites, replacement workers and other factors undermined the power of strikes. Union growth took a back seat to defending previously won gains. And when organizing was attempted, employer opposition that had previously been ineffective was replaced with intense and sophisticated tactics that, to this day, prevent or defeat organizing drive after organizing drive. Making matters worse, during the “good” years, unions became institutionalized, wealthy, insular, oblivious and change resistant.

The net effect is that unions have inexorably declined in slow motion, rather like the old metaphor of putting a frog in cool water and then heating the water a few degrees at a time. The frog doesn’t know its being boiled until it’s already cooked.

Can a dead frog be revived? Maybe. What’s been making noise in the process of trying to regrow unions has been the split of the AFL-CIO. One group of unions, under the banner Change to Win (CTW) has left the AFL-CIO to create a new alliance focused almost exclusively on rebuilding union power by organizing more workers. Those unions, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Teamsters, the United Food and Commercial Workers, (UFCW), UNITE-HERE and others have two things in common.

First and foremost, the CTW unions are mostly based in sectors where the work is not easily transferred to low wage havens. Employers can’t send an office building to Mexico City to be cleaned every night. It’s
not economically feasible for them to deliver a truckload of TV’s from the warehouse in Atlanta to the Best Buy store in Miami by first driving the TV’s to Guatemala to pick up a lower wage driver. Manufacturing sector unions, on the other hand, all of which remain in the AFL-CIO, have been devastated in part by the combination of work that has been moved offshore and by the power employers gain by threatening to move the work.

The second thing that distinguishes CtW is its commitment to change. For whatever reasons, most of the unions that remain in the AFL-CIO appear to be surprisingly content with some version of the status quo. (A few lively and innovative unions, the California Nurses Association (CNA) being a leading example, are aligned with the AFL-CIO.)

Whether CtW’s vision and strategy are too limited and too late remains to be seen. On the plus side, they acknowledge the need for global coalitions and global strategies. They are committed to coordinated approaches within economic sectors as a means of leveraging more power. They definitely have energy and media attention.

At the same time they perpetuate a completely top-down model of union organization. They seem quite prepared to operate in an environment where manufacturing work becomes increasingly union-free. The leadership of CtW unions is no less “pale, male and stale,” than that of the AFL-CIO unions. Their approach also rests largely on the 20th century model of organizing the work place in an economy in which more and more employment is transitory.

Labor as Part of a Larger Movement

One thing that all unions have in common, regardless of their “federation” alignment, is a high degree of isolation from other progressive forces. Labor conflicts are not seen as struggles that impact the agenda of other activists in the peace, sexual rights, civil rights, environmental or other “progressive” communities. Years of union supplied resources of all kinds to progressive organizations and causes have not brought an outpouring of concern or support as big labor has been turning into tiny labor, year after year after year. Union outreach efforts to link progressive to worker struggles like Justice for Janitors and Jobs with Justice, get far less support than they deserve.

One thing that all unions have in common, regardless of their “federation” alignment, is a high degree of isolation from other progressive forces.

How come? As already noted, everybody has struggles of their own. Unions have come to be seen as “special interests.” Unions haven’t done a particularly good job of reaching out and being inclusive. Unions themselves have done much to perpetuate the fallacy that if Democrats get elected then unions will do well too. Further, there are sometimes thorny conflicts between worker interests and other progressive causes. The workers who make land-mines, for example, belong to the UAW. Workers at other “arms race” manufacturers are union members too. It’s quite fashionable to berate gas guzzling SUV’s. Fair enough. But thousands of workers support their families by assembling them.

All that said, it’s hard to imagine achieving the promise of a “better world is possible,” without engaging workers and successful worker struggles. Is 21st century capitalism different enough to require a radically different model of what a union is and does? In my opinion, the answer to that question is yes. But agree or disagree, the conversation on the subject of workers interests and worker power needs to be broader than it is. The dialogue about progressive issues needs to embrace worker and union issues more extensively. Struggles such as the UNITE-HERE campaign to unionize CINTAS, the fight at NYU against academia’s union-busting efforts; the efforts of AFSCME and SEIU to unionize new economy workers who provide child and health care services in their homes deserve our support.

Join a picket line. Sign a petition. Find out if the American Rights at Work (ARAW), Human Rights Tour is coming to your town. Write a letter to the editor. Don’t wait for an engraved invitation. Labor’s crisis belongs to all of us.

Frank Joyce is a member of RESIST’s Board of Advisors and a long-time union activist. He is the communications director of the United Auto Workers.

Heading for a Train Wreck

Labor Debate Produces More Heat than Light

BILL FLETCHER, JR.

A debate over the future of the AFL-CIO has been under way for some months and, for the life of me, while the debate becomes more intense, the differences seem to blur. Yet the feeling that one gets is that we are headed for a train wreck.

The debate began when the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) released their “Unite to Win” plan for labor’s revitalization. Its main suggestions were: (1) the mergers of national/international unions to reduce inter-union competition and improve unions’ use of resources and (2) the focus of unions on organizing workers in their core areas, i.e., unions organizing workers that have traditionally organized, rather than taking a scattered approach to organizing.

Key Challenges Ignored

The issues SEIU raised were important, but largely secondary to the greater challenge facing labor. Missing from the SEIU analysis (and virtually anything else that has subsequently appeared from either SEIU, its allies, or its opponents) have been both a clear understanding of the political and economic forces that workers are up against and strategies for tackling critical issues, including, but not limited to:

Globalization; the US government’s increased shift to the right and increasing hostility towards workers and their unions; a strategy for organizing critical regions like the US South and Southwest, and particu-

continued on page four
continued from page three
larly how to ally with African Americans and Latinos in these regions; a political action strategy that would allow working people to advance an agenda and promote candidates that represent their interests; the continued relevance of fighting racism, sexism and other forms of oppression and intolerance if workers are ever to unite; how to work with and build mutual support with workers in other countries; and the critical importance of joining with others to fight for democracy.

Instead of grappling with these challenges, the fight focuses on arcane issues such as whether the AFL-CIO should give larger or smaller dues rebates to unions that are allegedly organizing, and whether the AFL-CIO Executive Council should be larger or smaller.

Structure Versus Strategy
These contentious debates make a dangerous assumption: that the decline of unions is largely the fault of the structure of the AFL-CIO and/or how the AFL-CIO has operated. It ignores something around which most union leaders are in denial: the problems facing the union movement are with the way that unions see themselves; their lack of a mission and strategy; and their blindness to the real features of the barbaric society that is unfolding before our eyes.

In the absence of a discussion of vision and strategy, personal attacks have been substituted. It is amazing to watch union leaders impugn each others’ characters, while some of them play pattycake with the likes of President Bush—someone not noted for pro-worker attitudes or actions.

The US labor movement has badly needed a debate about its future, but the culture of US unions generally precludes honest debates. Rather than a free flow of constructive ideas, most leaders surround themselves with a protective bubble to keep out any “bad news” and/or provocative suggestions. If dissenting views are raised, the dissenters are often isolated or undermined.

Thus, it should not surprise anyone that the union movement has, over time, become pickled in its own juices. With leaders who stay in office for what to many feels to be an eternity, and with the suppression of dissent, too many of those who wish to see change introduced are forced out, or, as a friend of mine says, are “beached.”

It is, therefore, amazing to witness the spectacle of some unions threatening to leave the AFL-CIO and others threatening to drive others out after so little and so pitiful a discussion.

All this is taking place while rank-and-file union activists find themselves increasingly alienated by the debate or outright fearful of the outcome. Only limited efforts have been made by either side to bring the debate to the members.

Workers have not been asked their opinions, nor has there been much effort toward constructive and principled debates. Instead, they find themselves feeling that they are at the base of Mount Olympus while the gods fight out the final battle thousands of feet above their heads.

New Debate Needed
Ironically, a debate needs to take place, but it needs to be completely reframed, a thought that probably scares the leaders much more than the members. It needs to be a debate about a vision for the future of workers in the US, not to mention the rest of the world. It needs to be a debate about what sorts of strategies work in the face of dramatic changes in the economy, including the way that work is done, and the fact that growing numbers of people are not working in the formal economy at all.

It needs to be a debate that asks the question of how we stop the use of working people as cannon fodder in unjust wars. It needs to be a debate about whether the financial burden of society gets placed on the bottom of the economic pyramid or on those who possess wealth and privilege.

Bill Fletcher, Jr. is a long-time labor and international activist. He is currently president of TransAfrica Forum. This article is reprinted with his permission from Labor Notes (www.labornotes.org, August 2005) and does not necessarily reflect the views of TransAfrica Forum. A version of this article originally appeared June 2005 in Monthly Review.
Organizing Low-Wage Women
9to5 on the Front Lines of Feminist and Labor Organizing

LINDA MERIC

When 9to5, National Association of Working Women was founded in 1973, one-third of all working women were employed in administrative support positions, then the largest and fastest-growing sector of the workforce. Office workers who joined the first 9to5 group in Boston faced many problems: low pay, limited advancement opportunity, little control over working conditions. A bank teller didn’t make enough to get a loan from the bank she worked for; a clerk in a hospital couldn’t afford to get sick; a university secretary couldn’t afford to send her children to college. Many of the women in these jobs lived near or in poverty—but they were not being reached by anti-poverty groups, nor were they the focus of feminist organizations. At the time, most unions ignored them.

While working women have made a lot of progress since then, many of those challenges remain. “When I couldn’t make ends meet, I thought I was a bad parent. When I heard about 9to5 on the news I learned I wasn’t alone. I could do something to improve things for myself and my family,” says 9to5 member Cherie.

Women’s Movement and Unions

From the early days, 9to5 leaders were interested in the intersection between the women’s movement and the labor movement. Would unionization work for clerical workers? After some local efforts in Boston, 9to5 began exploring a relationship with an international union. In 1981, District 925 was born as an affiliate of Service Employees International Union. That group, which functioned as a separate organization from 9to5, National Association of Working Women, organized women office workers across the country to bargain collectively with their employers.

Union women overall make higher wages than non-union employees and usually have better benefits. A union contract can also provide protection on the job from arbitrary firing and recognition for seniority. So there were clear benefits to unionization for clerical workers. 9to5 found that working as a non-profit association had advantages as well, particularly in involving women for whom unionization wasn’t an immediate option and in attracting media visibility.

What Our Collaborations Look Like

Since those early days, 9to5 has expanded its focus to encompass all low-wage and no-wage women workers. We have members in all 50 states; our largest chapter is in Colorado. We still share many issues of interest with the labor movement. We’ve built strategic alliances with a broad network of labor, religious, women’s, and community organizations and agencies nationally and locally. Labor groups we work with in Colorado include the Colorado AFL-CIO, Denver Area Labor Federation, Jobs With Justice and Service Employees International Union.

We serve as a bridge organization across gender, ethnicity, class and sectors, helping bring labor and community, poverty-fighting and women’s groups together to build our strength, broaden our impact and enhance our ability to win change. Soon after its founding in 1996, 9to5 Colorado partnered with ACORN, the Denver Area Labor Federation, the Denver Ministerial Alliance and others in a concentrated 4 year campaign to win a Denver living wage ordinance that guaranteed raises for clerical and child care workers, among other employees working for city contractors.

Within our collaborative work, 9to5 has worked to influence the women’s movement to pay more attention to low-wage workers and to welfare issues. Because 9to5 members sometimes end up on welfare because of problems at work like low pay, discrimination and lack of family leave, we’ve helped demonstrate that solutions to welfare must include reform of work. Within the movements focused on work - labor and the good jobs movement - we’ve tried to put more emphasis on gender issues and particularly the need for flexibility for male and female workers for family care responsibilities. And we’ve challenged the work-family movement to pay more attention to the needs of low-wage workers and women moving off welfare, to push for policies so mothers don’t get fired or sanctioned from welfare for family caregiving.

How Are We Winning

9to5’s current work in Colorado illustrates our coalition work with organized labor. We’ve put a face on the Wal-Mart class action sex discrimination lawsuit, publicizing the story of a 9to5 Colorado member involved in the legal action and making the connection between the corporation’s refusal to pay and promote women fairly and its efforts to prevent union organizing. 9to5 Colorado Board member Mary Henderson, a Wal-Mart employee in southern Colorado and a participant in the class action lawsuit, says, “I’m not an isolated incident. The way we women are being treated is not respectful. If I can help one woman out there, the whole fight is worth it.”

9to5 Colorado also adopted a union grocery store and distributed informational leaflets to shoppers while workers were engaged in a difficult contract battle. We’ve supported the Service Employees’ International Union’s Justice for Janitors contract campaigns and a Denver Health nurses’ organizing drive.

We’re helping lead good jobs efforts directed by the Denver Area Labor Federation’s Front Range Economic Strategy Center that would require businesses receiving public subsidies to provide community benefits. 9to5 helped frame “good jobs” as ones that have family-flexible policies as well as living wages and family health care coverage, and we’ve involved low-income women in efforts to win community hiring and job training for those family-supporting jobs. We’ve also led the

continued on page six
campaign's efforts around on-site child care and ensuring that care is accessible and affordable to low-income neighbors as well as workers at the redevelopment. At the same time, we've supported efforts by the Colorado Building Trades Council to win a Project Labor Agreement at the site, just as they've supported our key issues.

9to5 Colorado is the convener of an unemployment insurance coalition consisting of community organizations, think tanks and labor unions. The result of this coalition's work this year was the passage and signing by the Governor of the Unemployment Insurance for Domestic Violence Victims bill, a bill that removes some obstacles to UI eligibility for domestic violence survivors.

Additionally, the legislature passed a coalition-initiated measure establishing a UI Alternate Base Period. ABP counts more recent earnings of very low-wage workers and recent entrants to the workforce (most often women) to calculate UI eligibility should a worker lose a job through no fault of her own. The bill, which was vetoed by the Governor, would have affected approximately 800 of the lowest income workers in the state. We'll be working to expand our coalition and run the bill again in 2006.

9to5 is the lead organization in Colorado working on Parental Leave for School Activities and other family leave issues. We've gotten tremendous support from the Colorado AFL-CIO in educating policymakers and mobilizing union members, and from the American Federation of Teachers paraprofessionals union in providing testimony at public hearings.

These coalition efforts with organized labor aren't always easy, and sometimes involve principled struggle over our different priorities and strategies. But building a multi-faceted collaboration between 9to5 and organized labor around our common goals has resulted in both movements bringing more to the table than we could alone, and increasing our potential to win now and into the future.

Linda Meric is the national director of 9to5, National Association of Working Women. 9to5 Colorado received a grant from RESIST this year. For more information, contact 9to5 Colorado, 655 Broadway Suite #400, Denver, CO 80203; www.9to5colorado.org.

Day Laborers Stand Out
Contingent Workers Visible, Demand Rights

ABBY SCHER

What happens when unions are no longer strong enough through force of numbers to set a living wage, not only for their own workers but for non-unionized workers in similar jobs? What happens when state and federal agencies barely enforce the labor laws on the books because workers aren't organized enough to make them? What happens when local, state and federal governments outsource jobs to contractors—private businesses that pocket large profits while paying their workers much less than the government once did and with none of the benefits?

And what happens to those who migrate to work in a US economy that is increasingly unregulated?

Organizing happens, that's what.

Organizing on Corners, in Communities

More and more of the jobs in the US are temporary, part-time, seasonal, or privatized (this is the definition of contingent work). This is true for jobs where this has long been the case—like on farms, in restaurants and day care—but also in hotels, construction, maintenance, and nursing homes. The same people are soaked with these grueling and low-paying jobs as have always been soaked with the grueling and low-paying jobs. Women are 44% more likely to hold a part-time job involuntarily than men. African Americans are one-and-a-half times as likely, plus they are channeled into the temporary labor force in higher proportions. They are not covered by unemployment insurance if they can't find work for a while. Forget about health insurance.

Day laborers—usually men in construction and women in domestic work—are perhaps the most visible of contingent workers. They gather in very public spots to meet with employers, such as the parking lots of Home Depots or street corners right off the highway. Their organizing has become visible, and, with perhaps three-quarters of day laborers undocumented, the target of an anti-immigrant backlash.

One such example happened in Herndon, Virginia this past summer. That was when
continued from page six

“Worker-led day laborer organizing has really exploded in the past few years and they’re in contact with one another,” says Amy Sugimori, a staff lawyer working on immigrant issues with the National Employment Law Project (NELP), based in New York City. “Bargaining at the hiring site—that’s a very particular organizing strategy.”

For domestic workers, on the other hand, some of the goals are bringing more formality into the work relationship using a standard contract or bill of rights, Sugimori points out. Because of the Jim Crow compromises with southern Senators built into the Depression-era labor reforms, domestic workers are excluded from the National Labor Relations Act. Live-in domestics are specifically excluded from overtime in the Fair Labor Standards Act. They can be discriminated against, because only employers with at least 15 employees are covered by federal law. Yet they still have legal rights.

Lillian Juarez is the 53-year-old director of the Unity, the domestic workers cooperative formed by the Workplace Project, one of the country’s first worker centers, in Hempstead, Long Island. “They work six days a week,” says Juarez. “House cleaners were making $10 a day from 9am to 6pm. Now they are asking $80 for four hours so women have more time for their families. We educate the women to ask for more money for their work.”

Unity has 111 members. Juarez, an immigrant from El Salvador, has been a member of the Workplace Project since 1993, was a house cleaner herself, and has directed the cooperative for four of its five years.

“We also are empowering the women by offering different workshops: on domestic violence, preventative health, nutrition.” Unity also offers pastry classes to give the women a broader range of job skills. And it is allying with Domestic Workers United, a New York center, in promoting state standards for domestic workers.

But finding the women isn’t always easy. Organizers visit bus and train stations, or talk to women traveling on buses. Sometimes they find women because they call the worker center for help.

The Workplace Project, founded by a lawyer, was a trend setter in demanding that the legal system defend all workers’ rights. Some states’ attorneys general, like those in New York, Illinois and Massachusetts, actually ally with advocates and prosecute employer scofflaws—like Duane Reade pharmacy in New York, which outsourced its delivery work so that it could cast a blind eye to substandard wages, and was forced this past spring to pay out as much as $7,000 to an underpaid worker.

NELP cosponsored a national gathering of advocates this spring to brainstorm tactics on how to get states to enforce the minimum wage. Lawyers are trying to figure out how to stem the impact of the US Supreme Court’s horrible Hoffman Plastics decision from 2003, which refused to award back pay to an undocumented worker fired for labor organizing in his workplace. And researchers are starting to come out with documentation on the scale of the problem of underpaid, overworked, overexploited people—unexamined by the government. Abel Valenzuela at UCLA, Siobhan McGrath of the Brennan Center, the Urban Institute and others are all coming out with studies or preliminary findings on this overlooked area of the labor force that will help workers make their case.

“It’s by definition a hidden statistic,” says McGrath, who just published preliminary findings in the September/October issue of Dollars and Sense magazine. But the workers are making sure that they are no longer hidden.

Abby Scher is a journalist and a member of RESIST’s Board of Directors.

**Workers Confront Shops**

**SAN LUCAS WORKERS CENTER**

Day laborers get hired and fired every day. Their day begins before 4:30 a.m. when they are required to show up at the day labor agency dispatch room to wait and see if they will be sent to work. They are usually sent to work at factories in the suburbs around 6:00 a.m. They are transported in overcrowded, unlicensed vans to the worksite and charged $4.00 illegally for the ride. They usually work in slave labor conditions, where the supervisor tells them, “faster, faster.” They work eight hours, often with only a short break to eat their lunch on a cardboard box. They then wait, sometimes one or two hours, to be picked up to return to the agency. The workers then go home by public transportation. They spend 13-14 hours in this process daily.

The San Lucas Workers Center in Chicago, Illinois organizes US-born and immigrant day laborers for full workplace rights and better access to regular work. At the heart of San Lucas is a commitment to self-determination. San Lucas is a worker-membership, worker-led organization. “Lasting change in the day labor industry can only occur with collective action led by workers who are directly affected,” states Mark Saulys, worker-leader. San Lucas is raising the visibility of the industry by going after prominent Chicago corporations that contract to bad agencies and generally keep a ‘willful ignorance’ about their abusive practices. This is the first worker-run campaign to pressure owners of prominent companies in Chicago to use agencies that abide by a Community Code of Conduct. “You don’t have to go halfway around the world to see sweatshop labor conditions, it’s happening right here in Chicago. It’s about time these companies are held accountable for how day labor workers are employed in these abusive conditions,” said Randy Smith, a day labor representative asks San Lucas members to vacate the premises, but worker-leader Mario Johnson insists on speaking to the management. Photo courtesy of SLWC
Labor Organizing Resources

Below is a brief list of resources for those seeking more information about organizing for workers' rights. Many contain useful links to additional resources.

9to5 National Association of Working Women
152 West Wisconsin Avenue, #408
Milwaukee, WI 53203; www.9to5.org
National, grassroots membership organization that strengthens women's ability to work for economic justice.

ACORN Living Wage Resource Center
88 3rd Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11217
www.livingwagecampaign.org
Tracks the living wage movement and provides materials and strategies to living wage organizers nationwide.

American Rights at Work
1100 17th Street NW, Suite 950
Washington, DC 20036
www.americansrightatwork.org
Promotes freedom of workers to organize unions; website includes labor news and other resources.

ARISE Citizen Policy Project
PO Box 612, Birmingham, AL 36101
www.arisecitizens.org
Coalition of religious, community, and civic groups that promote state policies to improve the lives of low-income people.

Association for Union Democracy
104 Montgomery Street, Brooklyn, New York, 11225; www.uniondemocracy.org
Dedicated to the idea that internal democracy makes unions stronger and better able to fight for the rights and interests of working people.

Campaign for Labor Rights
1247 E Street SE
Washington, DC 20003
www.campaignforlaborrights.org
Works to inform and mobilize grassroots activists in solidarity with major, international anti-sweatshop struggles.

Farmworker Justice Fund
1010 Vermont Ave NW #915, Washington, DC 20005; www.fwjustice.org
Works to improve the living and working conditions of migrant and seasonal farmworkers.

Jobs with Justice
1325 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20005
www.jwj.org
Connects workers' rights struggles to a larger campaign for economic and social justice.

Labor Notes
7435 Michigan Avenue, Detroit, MI, 48210; www.labornotes.com
Publishes a magazine to put the "movement" back in the labor movement.

The North American Alliance for Fair Employment
33 Harrison Ave., 3rd Floor, Boston, MA 02111; www.FairJobs.org
Network of organizations concerned about the growth of contingent work and its impact on the well being of all workers.

National Day Laborer Organizing Network
2533 W. 3rd Ave., #101, Los Angeles, CA 90057; www.ndlon.org
Strengthens and expands the work of local day laborer organizing groups.

National Employment Law Project
55 John Street, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10038; www.nelp.org
Works to develop shared strategies to challenge regressive welfare and unemployment insurance policies, exploitation of immigrant workers, and other policies that harm low-wage workers.

Southeast Regional Economic Justice Network
PO Box 240, Durham, NC 27702
www.rejn.org
Offers informational services, training activities, and support for community organizing and publications.

Sweatshop Watch
1250 S. Los Angeles St. #214, Los Angeles, CA 90015; www.sweatshopwatch.org
Coalition of labor and community organizations committed to eliminating the exploitation that occurs in sweatshops.

The San Lucas Workers Center received a grant from RESIST this year. For more information, visit their website: www.sanlucasworkers.org
Living Wage Means Worker Rights
Athens-Clarke County, GA Activists Build Coalition to Gain Fair Wages

RAY MACNAIR

Athens-Clarke County, Georgia (A-CC) is similar to many communities across the United States. While A-CC has a higher than average poverty rate (currently settled at 28%), this poverty rate illuminates the growing economic gap that inflicts many communities in our country. We also have one of the highest high school dropout rates, and our crime rate is higher than the state average. Those who work full time earning minimum wages are unable to meet basic needs, such as housing, food and health care expenses.

To address this gap, several University of Georgia professors and students conceived of the Athens Living Wage Coalition in the summer of 2002 explicitly to seek a living wage for workers in the city. The living wage is a wage by which, working 40 hours per week, workers can pay their minimum bills. Health benefits are also included. The level we have established is $10.50 per hour, plus another $1.50 if health insurance is not provided. That produces an annual income of $22,000 working 40 hours per week, plus health, or roughly $25,000.

The Athens Living Wage Coalition formed as an advocacy movement with and for low-wage workers, designed to reverse the increasing difference between low wages and the median or average incomes for working families. Initially, it focused on the use of public tax dollars by seeking living wages for people who either work for governments (either local or state) or for contractors or programs funded by local and state governments. We do not want our tax dollars to be used to encourage poverty, disrespect for workers, and dependence on governmental benefits.

Coalition Forms, Expands

Members of the East Athens Human Services Advisory Committee, an African-American group based in East Athens, joined with the Athens Living Wage Coalition. The residents of East Athens hold a high proportion of low-paying jobs that would directly benefit from an adjusted living wage. That merger established the tone of our group: African-American members of the Athens-Clarke County community working with UGA students and faculty towards a solution for the problem of economic inequality, understanding that poverty is not limited to one race or gender. Just so, it will require the continued on page ten

Research On Living Wage Laws

Researchers in six municipalities (Detroit, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Miami-Dade County, Chicago, and San Francisco) systematically estimated the impact of proposed or recently enacted living wage legislation. All found similar results:

- The costs to employers were modest. For a majority of covered firms, the costs of complying with the living wage law came to less than one percent of their operating budgets.
- The costs to the taxpayer were negligible. Enforcement and monitoring expenses were in the range of a one to two hundred thousand dollars for city budgets that ran into the many billions. While it is unlikely that covered contractors would do so, even if they were to pass onto the public the entire expense of providing a living wage, the total costs would still come under one percent of each municipality’s budget.
- Given the modest nature of the costs, it was unlikely that firms would either reduce their employment of less-skilled workers or that the living wage laws would prove a disincentive for business investments.
- A modest but significant number of workers would be covered and gain by the laws. In Los Angeles, an estimated 7,500 would see the direct wage gains, while another 10,000 might gain from the ripple effect. Even factoring in reduced public assistance, the higher wages would deliver real income gains to families.

Two After-Passage Studies in Baltimore Confirm the Estimates

At one year and at three years after Baltimore passed its pioneering living wage law, two different research teams investigated the law’s impact over time. Both had similar findings:

- The city has experienced no increase in contract costs above normal inflation, nor has it witnessed a significant reduction in the number of firms bidding on these contracts.
- Employment of less-skilled workers had not been reduced in response to the living wage law. Business investment in the city continues to grow.
- Covered employers reported real gains through increased employee morale and productivity, and reduced employee turnover.

While researchers noted that part-time work could limit the income of some families, all workers interviewed pointed to real gains both to their wallets and their dignity.

Source: ACORN Living Wage Resource Center and Georgia Living Wage Coalition, www.atlantaliveingwage.org
Living Wage Means Worker Rights

continued from page nine

efforts of all members of the community to decrease its effects.

In addition to building community locally, we also sought the expertise of other justice activists. In the spring of 2003, Sandra Robertson of the Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger and Heidi Williamson of Working Women’s 9to5 (both Atlanta groups) came to Athens to educate us on the history and principles of organizing for living wages.

With their help, we also received our first grants from the Fund for Southern Communities and RESIST. These grants enabled us to hire an experienced organizer, and later we also hired a Latino recruiter to continue to build a coalition.

Public Education and Organizing Efforts

On December 4, 2003, long-time living wage advocate state Senator Vincent Fort spoke at a community event we sponsored. Despite bad weather conditions, a crowd of 50 people gathered to learn about the economic wage disparity in the area and what we could do about it.

In August of 2004 the organization’s name was changed to Economic Justice Coalition (EJC) to accurately reflect the group’s overall mission. That summer, EJC helped to register over 1,800 new voters in our community. We compiled a database of these new voters, encouraging them to join the living wage campaign.

Both to raise money and gain public attention, EJC held a raffle and sold tickets to two chicken barbecues. While the money raised through these events is minimal, they help publically promote the name and mission of EJC.

A Labor Day March in downtown Athens was attended by about 100 people. Local activists made speeches and a county commissioner read a proclamation on the steps of City Hall. It read in part: “Now therefore, I, Heidi Davison, Mayor of the Unified Government of Athens-Clarke County, hereby plan to continue working with the County Commission to maintain our county government’s Good Jobs standard of employee wages above the level of $10.50 per hour, with health benefits.”

The Labor Day event generated a flurry of letters in the local newspaper—on both sides of the living wage debate. The controversy sparked by the event fits in with one of EJC’s goals, namely to begin the Community Education and Outreach effort. The march has begun a dialogue between all members in the community concerning hourly workers. To be successful, the effort for living wages needs to be understood and embraced by many more citizens in our area.

Next Steps

Over the past year, EJC has made great strides in understanding where our weaknesses are and have recently made efforts to understand how to correct them. We are just now beginning to attract the attention we need to get our mission into the community dialogue. With the help of our local newspaper we are planning a formal forum to better discuss these ideas. Once this event has taken place, we should better understand the direction we need to take with our future planning.

At this point, a recent state law outlaws any local legislative living wage remedies. EJC seeks to promote fair wages through voluntary programs. For example, the county government can pay all of their employees a fair wage. Their service contracts can be selected through a bidding procedure, with fair wages and health benefits in mind. Businesses that pay fair wages can be recruited into the county and offered assistance. Such businesses are good for the community. We would like to honor those businesses that can be identified as “Fair Wage Businesses” that make for a healthy community.

We have also recently begun to support the efforts of a local student group on the University of Georgia (UGA) campus. UGA employs nearly 15,000 people and is the largest employer in our area by a factor of ten. It is one of the largest employers in Northeast Georgia. Many politicians and other civic leaders have suggested that any real hope of achieving economic and wage justice lies in the fight for hourly workers’ rights within UGA.

EJC is organizing students and workers to become more aware of the problems of the university’s low wages, sponsoring presentations to churches and other civic organizations as well as with our Labor Day Event. Eventually, pressure will be brought to bear by faculty, students, and representatives of the community on the university’s administration.

We have qualified support for living wages from some county commissioners. They would like to see us expand our coalition before they act as advocates for some of our goals. We also have the same qualified support and interest from the local newspaper editor and from other groups around town. It is incumbent upon us to clearly set and publicize our goals, to be advocates for our mission, and to help voters understand the benefits a living wage would mean for everyone.

Ray MacNair is the Co-Chair for the Economic Justice Coalition. EJC received a grant from RESIST last year. For more information, contact EJC, PO Box 1225, Athens, GA 30603-1225; www.econjustice.org.
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RESIST is committed to supporting activism for economic justice, especially including the rights of workers. Below is a sample of groups that have recently received grants from RESIST.

**9 to 5 Atlanta**
501 Pulliam Street, SW #344, Atlanta, GA 30312; www.atlanta9to5.org

Working for economic justice through advocacy, public education, leadership development, and direct action campaigns.

**Black Workers for Justice**
216 Atlantic Ave., Rocky Mount, NC 27801

Organizing the working poor and building a new rank-and-file labor movement in the US South.

**Chicago Area Workers’ Center**
3047 W Cermak, Suite 7, Chicago, IL 60623

Improving the working conditions of low-income workers, especially day laborers, through collective action.

**Community Action for Justice in the Americas**
102 McLeod, PO Box 9274, Missoula, MT 59807; www.caja.org

Bridging the gap between labor activists in the US and workers in Central America.

**Fuerza Unida**
710 New Laredo Highway, San Antonio, TX 78211; www.laferzaunida.org

Organizing women workers, youth and immigrants for social and economic justice.

**Georgia Employee Federation**
250 Georgia Avenue, SE, Atlanta, GA 30312; www.gef.8m.net

Addressing the needs of minorities, working families, and those that have received work-related injuries.

**Jobs with Justice - Rhode Island**
270 Westminster Street, Providence, RI 02903; www.rijw.org

Connecting struggles of workers, local community and neighborhood groups.

**Latino Union of Chicago**
1619 W. 19th Street, Chicago, IL 60608

Challenging the exploitation and abuse of non-unionized immigrant day laborers through political action and the creation of a democratic Worker’s Center.

**Multi-Ethnic Immigrant Worker Organizing Network (MIWON)**
3465 W 8th Street, Los Angeles, CA 90008

Providing leadership development, training and coalition building assistance to low-wage immigrant workers, challenging the exploitation within the Los Angeles immigrant job market and working toward legalization of undocumented immigrants.

**PUEBLO**
601 E. Montecito Street, Santa Barbara, CA, 93103; www.sbpueblo.org

Organizing for a living wage campaign by involving low-income communities in economic justice activism.

**Queers for Economic Justice**
526 West 139th Street, #9, New York, NY 10031; http://queersforeconomicjustice.org

Working to demonstrate the impact that welfare reform, homelessness and other economic issues have had on LGBTQ people.

**Richmond Coalition for a Living Wage**
224 South Cherry St., Richmond, VA 23220

Building and strengthening a coalition of low-income community organizations implementing a local city Living Wage Ordinance.

**Student/Farmworker Alliance**
P.O. Box 603, Immokalee, FL 34143
www.sfalliance.org

Connecting farmworkers and students and organizing to end exploitative labor relations in the agricultural world.

**Tompkins County Living Wage Coalition**
115 The Commons, Ithaca, NY 14850
www.tclivingwage.org

Organizing coalitions of community, labor and faith-based groups to initiate and support campaigns focused on economic and social justice.

**Vermont Workers’ Center**
PO Box 883, Montpelier, VT 05601
www.workerscenter.org

Organizing for economic justice, including livable wages, affordable health care and humane workplaces.