

Southern Workers Assembly Webinar on the Impact of COVID-19 on Southern Workers



Saladin Muhammad,
Co-Director, SWA

A Call to Organize : *Safe Jobs Save Lives*

The working class is organizing at workplaces and communities across the US fighting for their health, safety and lives. They are seeing the contradictions in a capitalist system. By its unreadiness, its profit driven priorities in its efforts to divide and scapegoat masses of working class and oppress people. Labor is the most organized and resourced section of the working class within the US economy. It is strategically positioned to help mobilize power to force critical change. Challenging the government, especially the Democratic Party, as

then, has not been a strong suit for the top down US labor movement. The US south is the largest region in the US where labor is the least organized. There are industries in the south that will unionize for decades before moving south from the north, midwest, and countries abroad. The south is a strategic region in the US economy, the exploitation and oppression of the working class with deep and racist impacts on the black

SWA “Safe Jobs Save Lives” Campaign Webinar #1 Report — April/May 2020

This Webinar was conducted on Tuesday, April 28 at 6 pm. Simultaneously lived streamed on Facebook, the Southern Workers Assembly Webinar reached more than 8,000 viewers. Check out the full webinar at <http://southernworker.org>.

Webinar Facilitator:

Danielle Brown, Black Voters Matter NC State Coordinator; A. Philip Randolph Institute Organizer; and Founder of IMPAXT, Inc.

Speakers included:

Saladin Muhammad, Co-Director, Southern Workers Assembly, founding member of Black Workers for Justice, and retired International Representative with UE

Carl Rosen, United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), National President

Libby Devlin, National Nurses Organizing Committee/National Nurses United, National Bargaining Director, SWA Steering Committee from Tampa, FL.

Gregg Roddy, President ATU Local 725 in Birmingham, AL

Ajamu Dillahunt, American Postal Workers Union, Retired Local president, and Director of Education for NC APWU Council, SWA Steering Committee

Dominic Harris, President, Charlotte City Workers Union chapter of UE Local 150, Water Department

Meg Maloney, restaurant worker, member of the New Orleans Workers Group and founding member of the New Orleans Hospitality Workers Alliance

Leticia Zavala, Farm Labor Organizing Committee, supporting rural migrant farm workers

working class of the oppressed. For instance, workers must have a social justice and social change organizing perspective in waging a south wide campaign, with the revelation that was hidden by the mainstream media and the government for several months, that the Black working class has been the hardest hit by the coronavirus. The South with 57% of the Black population in the US, is the major region of struggle against systems of structural racism and to forge a genuine unity of the working class. The Southern Workers Assembly is holding this webinar as a launching point for south wide *Safe Jobs Save Lives Campaign* that has already begun in parts of North Carolina. The SWA believes that uniting the actual struggles of organized and unorganized workers at their workplaces, fighting for protections from the COVID-19, needs a campaign that connects them and helps to raise consciousness as a working class struggle. As we struggle to protect and save our lives, we must think and organize for a systemic change, like fighting for Medicare for all. Our speakers will be talking about the conditions and the struggles of the organizations, the unions, and the organizing efforts so that we can begin to get a sense of some of the lessons in struggle from the forces engaged in fighting in the south. We have three principles of unity that's tied to the



organizing of the *Safe Jobs Save Lives Campaign*. **One**, the right to a safe workplace. Everyone has the right to assert a safe workplace and the right to refuse unsafe work. **Two**, building workplace organization and uniting with your co-workers in collective action is the best way to combat unsafe conditions, including building local workers organizations. **Three**, healthcare is a human right. Healthcare should not be tied to the employer. It should be provided to everyone, including those recently unemployed, the homeless, through a universal single payer health system, like Medicare for All. And all testing and treatment related to COVID-19 should be covered by single payer public health insurance like Medicare and Medicaid, while also recognizing that we need to immediately fight employers to provide affordable health insurance coverage until the day [M4A] is won.



Libby Devlin, NNU National Bargaining Director

You know, in the National Nurses United we hold certain principles to be fundamental. We believe that the interests of the employer and **the** interests of the nurses are in opposition to each other. So in other words, the nurses' natural alliance is with the patients and the community and not with the

employer and the healthcare industry. And so all of our work flows from that fundamental principle. When it comes to COVID, the hospital industry's interest is continuing to make money in spite of the public health crisis. The nurses, in the patient's interests of course in providing the needed health care to people who are sick.....

The last point I wanted to make is that on May Day [2020], nurses at over 150 hospitals will be doing simultaneous workplace actions, demanding PPE and a safe workplace for themselves and their patients. It really is a matter of life and death that they win that demand.



Dominic Harris, President, UE 150

I'll just walk you through what actions we've been taking. There's been a lot of them and we've been doing our best to fight back as much as we could. We started with a press conference led by state mental health members held on March 16 at the governor's office in the [Raleigh]state capitol where we delivered

our demands for all workers, including expanding unemployment insurance, granting universal paid sick leave Medicare for all, and PPE. This led to the Department of Health and Human Services reaching back out and setting up regular meet and confer with our members and DHHS, and they continue those meetings bi-weekly. And we sent letters to the politicians and city managers in Charlotte, Greensboro, Durham and Raleigh, demanding Medicare For All, PPE, double time hazard pay, and split shifts so workers wouldn't, you know, have to come in all together bunched up so we can, since we are essential.....further reduce the risk of coming in contact with COVID-19.

This is a really critical time for the working class, not only in this country but all around the world because everybody's facing this, this pandemic knows no, no borders, obviously. It's literally a life and death situation right now for people who are still going into the workplace every day. You

know, we've always known the corporations and the rich, they put profits ahead of workers lives. We've seen that throughout history, workers have to fight back....But now with this COVID-19 pandemic that's come around and come along and really turned everything on its head. Most workers have not ever before felt this kind of threat to their lives, just by walking into their workplace every day. And frequently, it's threatened not only their own lives, but the lives of their family members at home also. So this is a new and traumatic situation for most workers.....So those workers need to fight to get sent home with sufficient income and health insurance so that they can survive during this time.



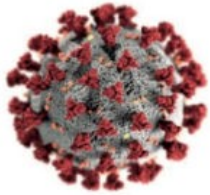
Carl Rosen, National President, UE

To start, the New Orleans Hospitality Workers Alliance is an organization created by and for hospitality workers. For those who don't know that includes like cooks, servers, hotel workers, bussers, pedicab drivers, bartenders and more. And right now, you know our industry is largely unorganized. So it's been an uphill battle in the past couple years since we've started..... [As] members of the Hospitality Workers Alliance and the New Orleans Workers Group, we put forth demands in response to the COVID-19 crisis before it even reached New Orleans.....such as paid sick days and a moratorium on evictions and utilities, a freeze on rent and mortgage payments and access to health care....particularly paid sick leave and health care. That's a huge issue in the hospitality industry as workers that are serving food to thousands of tourists. Following that, we held a demonstration in front of City Hall on March 9, which was also the same day the first case of COVID-19 was announced in New Orleans. We crashed the mayor's press conference, demanding that workers needs be brought to the forefront. That action was actually really helpful and spreading word that we existed to other workers.



Meg Maloney, NOLA Hospitality Workers Alliance

**SAFE JOBS
SAVE LIVES**



**#OrganizetheSouth
#COVID19**



Join the “Safe Jobs Save Lives” Campaign

Workers across the US South are on tmove demanding workplace safety amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic. Southern workers also need a strategy and self-organization to secure any gains they make through collective action. As we reach nearly 17 million people becoming recently unemployed, our for-profit health care system tied to a job is increasingly being exposed. Health care should be a human right for all.

Studies show that the Black working class, because of the capitalist system’s historical oppression and neglect, has suffered the highest number of deaths from COVID19. Fifty-seven (57%) percent of the US Black population live in the South, a region where racial, economic, social and political inequality has been the highest for Black America.

How do we use this moment to advance the organization of workers at the workplace and to build solidarity formations such as local workers assemblies, especially in the Southern region with lowest union density? How can this crisis help us get closer to a universal, single-payer health care system?

We seek to launch a South-wide campaign that unites workers on the following **PRINCIPLES**:

- 1) Right to a safe workplace** – everyone has the right to a safe workplace and a right to refuse unsafe work.
- 2) Building workplace organization** and uniting with your co-workers in collective action is best way to combat unsafe conditions, and
- 3) Healthcare is a human right** – health care should not be tied to the employer, it should be provided to everyone, even those recent unemployed through a universal single-payer system like “Medicare for All”, and all testing and treatment related to COVID-19 should be covered by single-payer public health insurance like Medicare. While also recognizing that we need to immediately fight our employers to provide affordable health insurance coverage until the day this is won.

Southern Workers Assembly PO Box 934 Rocky Mount, NC 27802

Email: info@southernworker.org

<http://southernworker.org>