



**ORGANIZING  
A WORKERS' MOVEMENT  
IN THE SOUTH:**

**BUILDING A LOCAL  
WORKERS ASSEMBLY**

**A HANDBOOK**

# Introduction

We are the Southern Workers Assembly. We seek to organize the unorganized working class across the South. We are the bedrock of our communities. We are a social movement, a voluntary organization fighting for social justice. Many of us are also members of unions, churches, and other local organizations.

The purpose of the Southern Workers Assembly is to organize rank-and-file workers to achieve a level of worker power through building organization in all kinds of workplaces, uniting them in assemblies, and exercising sufficient power through collectively bargaining contracts with employers, workplace mobilizations, labor and community solidarity, and independent political action.

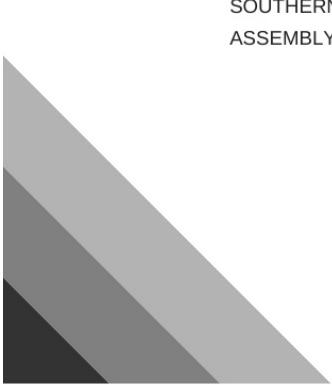
The Southern Workers Assembly organizes to fight for better working conditions, a living wage, and all-round respect, in other workers a society that empowers workers to benefit all and protect the earth. Once organized, workers can defend everyone.

We present this handbook to help us all do what must be done. It answers ten basic questions. Read it with other people. Read it in the workplace or the community. Read it knowing people will drop in and out. Read it with people who will hang in there. Read it to inform a plan for organizing others. Management may oppose your reading and organizing. But carry on!

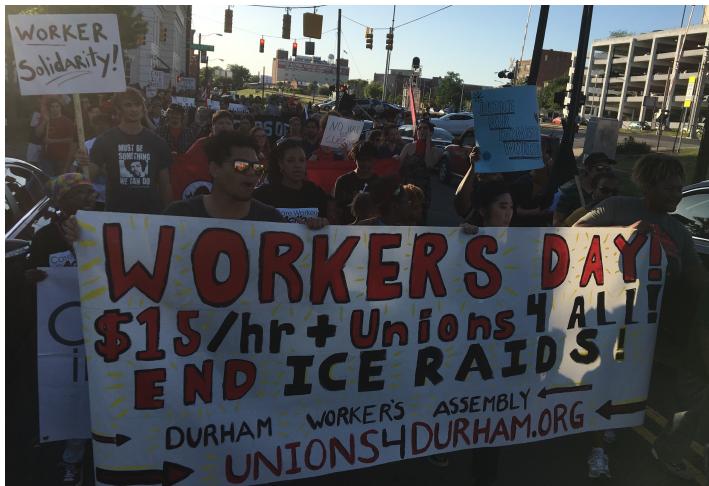
Everyone is needed in this struggle. Working class women and gender non-conforming folk: you are all essential workers. Younger people: you are fearless fighters who always make a difference. Older people: your experience is invaluable. Welcome to the Southern Workers Assembly!



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## 1. Why organize a workers' movement?

We live in a capitalist country. Capitalism is how the economy is organized. It is also the business model for every major institution, including hospitals, schools, and warehouses. Everything is for sale. We sell our ability to work to the capitalists for a wage. They sell us the goods we make and the services we provide. Insurance companies, hospitals and drug stores sell us health care.

We produce more wealth than we get paid in wages. Capitalists pocket the difference as profit. The whole system is built on our labor. Without our labor there would be no profits at all.

People are organized into two big classes. Those who work: the working class. Those who own the companies: the capitalist class. Other people in between? The middle class. They are the self-employed, professionals, small business owners, entertainers. Some of them make lots of money, but mostly not by exploiting us workers.

We, the workers, are the only social force that can challenge the capitalist class, force changes, and redirect society towards social justice. Why?

- 1. **We have the numbers.** The vast majority of people in the United States (US) are workers and their families.
- 2. **We are essential.** Without us society can't function.
- 3. If we get organized, **we can make change happen.**

The SWA believes that engaging and uniting rank-and-file unionized and un-unionized workers in the US South, around democratic principles of social justice unions, is critical to building a politically conscious and transformative US workers' movement.

The majority of workers can discuss working conditions in order to improve the situation. This is a clear reason why we need a working-class movement. We need the collective thinking of workers to develop a plan on how to challenge the rule of this capitalist class.

We need unity around a vision of building worker power to transform this country. Workers have seen advances, betrayals, divisions, and defeats, leading many to believe that labor cannot think and do better than capitalists do. That is not right. We know we can do better, not for the capitalists but ourselves, the working class. This cannot happen without strong organization and a democratic process of collective thinking and collective action.

Social justice unionism must help to rebuild worker confidence and shape a vision of worker power.<sup>1</sup> The US labor movement is the most organized and resourced section of the working-class. A strong labor movement could challenge the power of global corporations.<sup>2</sup> A strong workers' movement can be an independent political force in government fighting for working-class demands: health insurance for everyone; a living wage; pensions; a social contract insuring income for the unemployed; seniors, the disabled; and against systemic racism and all forms of discrimination.

A workers' movement must develop a climate of working-class struggle. The movement can organize and mobilize workers at multiple workplaces in a city and surrounding counties, taking the form of a social movement. Our goal is to have statewide workers assemblies able to impact corporate boards and state legislatures, all levels of local government, and congressional districts. Workers assemblies can help prepare workers to take control of the government and the economy. That is the goal of working-class power!

The Minnesota cop killing of George Floyd triggered massive anti-racist resistance. This created an anti-racist cultural shift among many young white forces. They come out of social movements focusing on women, immigrant rights, Muslim and LGBTQ issues. It has taken on an international character. A central theme is Black Lives Matter. Black working people are leading, so now is our

1. “Social justice unionism” is unionism that organizes and mobilizes rank-and-file workers to address the many oppressive economic, social and political conditions faced by the working class at work and in society.

2. “Three Steps to Reorganizing and Rebuilding the Labor Movement: Building new strength and unity for all working families,” by Stephen Lerner, [labornotes.org](http://labornotes.org) (December 1, 2002).

time to help shape the working-class demands and tactics. Only when the working-class moves will Black leadership have the base of power the movement needs.

What is needed in the work of the SWA (and other worker and labor organizing) is a Workers Program. A program will link struggles for immediate needs to strategic demands that builds transformative worker power.



## 2. Why organize in the South?

The US South plays a special role in shaping systemic racism and anti-labor policies. As the largest region in the US, it has a workforce of over 44 million and a union membership of 2.4 million. Compare this to one northern state: New York has a workforce of only 10 million and slightly over 2 million union members. All workers in the South (as everywhere) are under attack. Unions catch hell.

The South has the highest concentration of anti-labor laws. This began with the racist slave codes, followed by

Jim Crow laws that undermined Black Reconstruction after the Civil War, enforcing segregation and allowing land-owner capitalists to maintain power. Right-to-work laws began in 1947 as a section of the federal Taft-Hartley Act. This and other anti-union laws were buoyed in the South by racist feelings that Black and white people should not belong to the same unions.<sup>3</sup>

57% of Black people and 40% of Latinx people live in the South. Together they make up over 40% of the population in the South. They form an important economic and political base for organizing social justice unionism and political campaigns for worker representatives. A regional movement to build worker power could help build confidence in social justice unionism as a workers' movement for radical system change. At the same time, a militant social justice surge within the US labor movement can connect the struggle for worker power to the African American struggle for self-determination. Combining the two can be a basis for struggle against corporate control of the government.



3. We all need to study the great book by W.E.B. DuBois, Black Reconstruction in America. Also see Wikipedia, "Right-to-work law" and "Jim Crow laws."

The South is a region with low wages, low union density, a history of racist segregation and strong conservative racist politics. It has attracted major corporations seeking to escape organized labor. States outside of the South promoting the passage of right-to-work laws argue that these laws give the South an unfair advantage in attracting companies and for economy recovery, because they so strongly favor the wealthy.

The South is also increasingly central to the US national and the world's economy. The first 10 years following the

passage of NAFTA, saw a large shift of US and European industries to the South. For more than a decade now, nine Southern states have contributed a larger share to the US economy than the Rust Belt states that dominated US industry in the 20th century.<sup>4</sup>

For example, Smithfield Foods, headquartered in Smithfield, Virginia, is the world's largest pork producer. In 2013, it was purchased by a corporation from China. The world's largest hog slaughtering plant, a Smithfield plant located in Tar Heel North Carolina, processes 3,500 hogs daily.

The economic and social costs to the working class in the South have included underdeveloped communities, environmental racism, negative health effects, gentrification, lack of decent affordable housing and land loss for Black and family farmers. This impacts the entire working class, especially Black, Brown, Indigenous, women and poor white people.

4. "U.S. South, not just Mexico, stands in way of Rust Belt jobs revival," by Howard Schneider, reuters.com (April 7, 2017).

In the past, when unionization efforts were made in the South, they were often attacked as outside intrusions into Southern communities. This characterization was promoted by corporate, government, and racist anti-union forces. However, it is true that solid preparation work done in advance might have helped these efforts.

The working class in the South must be organized!



### **3. How did the Southern Workers Assembly get started?**

The Southern Workers Assembly (SWA) was organized in 2012. The North Carolina Public Service Workers Union, UE Local 150 and Black Workers for Justice, initiated the process. Organizing the South was part of UE150's organizing perspective when it affiliated with the United Electrical Workers National Union (UE) in 1997.

The SWA founding conference opposed holding the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Charlotte, NC. The main reason was that Charlotte was behind the passage of the state's current law that forbids public sector workers from collectively bargaining a union contract, written in 1959 by an all-white state Legislature. The SWA conference was also a call to both unionized and self-organized workers, to form the SWA as a regional framework to launch a social justice labor movement in the South.

The Charlotte Chapter of UE150, which had been organizing for over 8 years without formal recognition, organized weekly informational pickets outside City Hall the entire summer. The aim was to draw the attention of the thousands attending the DNC to conditions faced by Charlotte city workers denied collective bargaining rights. Their immediate demands were a pay increase and safety for city workers, and for Charlotte to use some of the \$50 million federal grant it received for hosting the DNC. Dues checkoff for union members and a system of “meet to confer” between management and union were also demands, which were won in the months after the DNC and the founding of SWA.

There were about 300 participants at the SWA founding conference. They included the following:

- United Electrical Workers Union Locals 150, 160 and 170 from NC, Virginia and West VA, Carolina Auto, Aerospace and Machine Workers Union (private sector of UE150)
- International Longshore Association Local 1422, South Carolina
- AFL-CIO President and delegation from South Carolina
- United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1208 from Smithfield Hog Plant in NC brought a busload and its National Civil Rights Committee made a \$5,000 donation
- Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), AFL-CIO
- Unite-Here Local 23 representing airport workers in Atlanta, Charlotte, DC, Texas, New Orleans, Mississippi
- United Campus Workers-CWA Local 3865 from Tennessee
- National Day Labor Organizing Network from Texas
- Black Workers for Justice NC
- Mississippi Workers Center, Jackson, Mississippi
- Ban the Box (jobs for ex-offenders)
- International Longshore Warehouse Union Local 10 from San Francisco, California
- UAW Local 896 from Detroit, Michigan



A strategic planning meeting held in December 2012 established a basic direction and some subcommittees. However, we failed to plan an organizational process after the founding conference. The organizational functions fell on too few comrades. The second term of the Obama administration diverted attention. The racist and harsh attacks against him from the white right, and by some from the Black left, led to a lack of a clear political perspective, including the important role of Black workers.

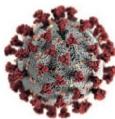
A few years later, the National Nurses Organizing Committee (NNOC), a leading union in the SWA, was helping to popularize the Medicare for All (M4A) Campaign being promoted by the Bernie Sanders presidential campaigns. They encouraged the SWA to take up the M4A campaign. The SWA wanted to help make it an issue for labor and the wider working-class

and not mainly an electoral candidate's campaign pledge.

This led to setting up an educational program of Worker's Schools in 2019. SWA has held 6 Worker's Schools over extended weekends to develop strategy and train cadres, including 3 schools as part of the Southern Workers M4A Campaign. Rallies were held across the states of NC and Florida and in cities in Georgia and South Carolina, during the primary elections in early 2020. The M4A campaign helped the SWA begin addressing some of the organizational weaknesses it had after the SWA founding conference.

In March 2020, the SWA developed the Safe Jobs Saves Lives Campaign after it was initiated by UE150 in response to the coronavirus pandemic. This campaign linked M4A to struggles at each workplace, a key battlefield for building a social justice workers' movement.

# SAFE JOBS SAVE LIVES



#OrganizetheSouth  
#COVID19



## **4. What is a worker's assembly?**

Despite the role of the South in the major shifts in the US and global economy over the past 40 years, US unions do not have a strategic plan focused on organizing labor in the South. The South continues to be the region receiving fewer resources for organizing and strategic campaigns, aside from major elections.

A workers assembly is a voluntary organization of rank-and-file workers. They come from multiple industries, multiple union locals, and community groups. The workers assembly establishes an education process, coordinates militant protest actions, and develops plans to advance the demands of workers and the overall movements for social justice. Workers assemblies become an organic part of the struggles for empowerment and radical change for workers and Black and other oppressed communities.

Workers assemblies are organized to establish a basic social movement framework to organize the working class. They create a framework for uniting the working-class and connecting the many struggles against oppression, exploitation, for liberation and sustainability of the planet.

Local workers assemblies form the basis for organizing state workers assemblies that connect to the regional organizing framework.

Because state governments control many policies that govern labor, it's important for local assemblies to collaborate to form statewide assemblies. The civil rights movement, while having a regional character in the



struggle against Jim Crow in the South, put pressure on local and state governments and representatives of congress within those states.

Currently, the Safe Jobs Saves Lives Campaign is providing a platform for connecting and building support for the scattered rank-and-file and union struggles in the various industries and surrounding communities impacted by COVID-19 in North Carolina and across the US South.



### **Local Workers Assembly best practices:**

The following steps provide guidelines for starting a new local workers assembly, tying together workplace organizations in a defined local geographic area.

#### **I. Build a workers assembly organizing committee**

A worker's assembly should not be understood as an end in itself. It is a place where workers come together to find advice and support as they endeavor to take collective

action to resolve specific issues in their workplaces. The purpose of the organizing committee is to begin the process of reaching out to local workers, identifying important issues, and forming a core group to recruit other workers to the Assembly.

1. 3-5 workplaces - Include representation of rank-and-file workers from at least 3 workplaces and/or workers' organizations. Preferably 5 workplaces. We recognize many workers may not be organized yet. But serious efforts should be made to bring in workplace organizations where possible.
2. Identify a joint campaign to launch the assembly to form the basis for worker organizations working together.
3. Show up for each other: Support campaigns and actions of local workplace organizations to build trust and contacts with their rank-and-file activists.

## **II. Five main tasks of the Local Workers Assembly**

1. Establish standards and expectations for all employers, both public and private sector, such as a Workers Bill of Rights, living wages, affordable/quality healthcare, right to refuse unsafe work, etc.
2. Host monthly Workers Assemblies where workers can speak out about workplace conditions and have broad community and labor solidarity.

3. Work to create favorable conditions for workers to organize. Create a venue for workers from various employers to feel comfortable reporting on their working conditions and speaking out, and receiving assistance in organizing on their job, including regular workplace organizing skills trainings.
4. Do regular workplace outreach to build a mass base amongst organized and unorganized workers. The assembly should regularly go to local workplaces, working-class shopping centers, bus stops, manufacturing plants etc. to distribute literature of the Southern Workers Assembly and about campaigns of the Local Workers Assembly, and collect contact information.
5. Attend the Southern Workers Schools of the SWA to connect with a South-wide network of other workplace organizations and assemblies and to get organizer training.

### **III. Organizational considerations**

1. Establish a Steering Committee that can develop agendas for monthly workers assemblies, plan trainings and develop strategy and direction for joint campaigns.
2. Let the struggle guide the work. Don't get ahead of yourself too soon with trying to develop written by-laws or a constitution. Don't get tied up in formalities, this will only slow you down. Allow time for the workers assembly to develop and let form follow function. If a written document defining decision making is necessary, such as handling finances, keep it simple and allow at least a year for common work to establish the basis for such a document.

## **5. What have we done so far?**

Lessons from different workers assemblies in motion across North Carolina.

### **A. Eastern North Carolina Workers Unity Council.**

The work of Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ) in Eastern NC beginning in 1981-85, set the framework for BWFJ's organizing of worker's organizing committees and workers assemblies. The Kmart workers' struggle against the unjust firing and race discrimination of 3 Black women workers was the launching pad for the formation of BWFJ. The Kmart struggle was promoted in the 3 counties surrounding Rocky Mount, a metropolitan city. Contacts were made with activists organizing in tobacco processing, poultry, textile and agricultural worker communities to support the Kmart struggle. They mobilized workers from industries in 7 rural counties to the BWFJ founding assembly in 1982 in Fremont NC at the 1st Missionary Baptist Church, resulting in workers from 10 counties joining BWFJ. They went back to their counties and industries to form Workplace Organizing Committees (WOCs).



Experiencing race discrimination, unsafe working condition, sexual harassment and low wages, Black workers were the first to join WOCs. Discussing and planning struggles against workplace racism was a new experience for many white workers in NC and probably the South. By 1986, WOCs were formed in 11 private and 1 public sector non-unionized workplaces in 3 counties surrounding Rocky Mount, 3 in the private sector in the Raleigh area, and 3 in the private sector in rural counties. A Workers Unity Council, later to be called a Workers' Assembly, was formed in workplaces in the Rocky Mount area.

The Eastern NC experience organized major campaigns using petitions, public hearings, rallies, plant leafleting and pickets. Organize the South Solidarity Tours took NC workers to the East, Midwest and West Coasts to meet with National Union Officers of the United Steelworkers and the United Electrical Workers Unions, rank-and-file activists and the members of the Mon Valley Unemployment Council. The Southern workers went into a coal mine converted into a museum in Pittsburgh PA., and were taken into a working steel mill by USW local union leaders in Cleveland OH. There were 4 major campaigns that gave BWFJ national and international recognition by labor union leaders and rank-and-file activists – 1988-89 Schlage Lock Campaign; 1991 Hamlet Imperial Foods Fire Campaign; 2005 International Worker Justice Campaign; 1997 organizing the NC Public Service Workers Union-UE Local 150; and the 1997, 98, 99 Southern International Private and Public sector and Women Workers Schools.

Public hearings, worker schools, workplace leafleting and picketing, developing WOC newsletters and a WUC

unity bulletin were tactics and tools used in the organizing and struggles. Two People's Health Screening Clinics, a Workers Legal clinic and a Community Empowerment Alliance of community-based organizations and unions were institutions organized by members of BWFJ, WUC and community organizations.

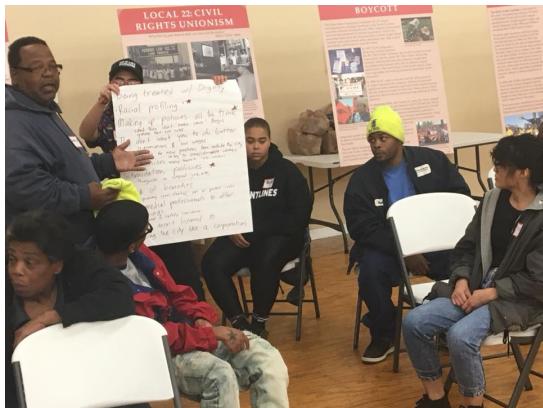
The mid-1990s saw the closing of many plants in Eastern NC where the majority of the WOCs were formed. The organizing emphasis then shifted to the public sector and the organizing of UE150.

### **B. Raleigh Workers Assembly**

Post the 2012 founding conference of the SWA, we attempted to convene NC contacts from the political actions (UE 150 Charlotte City picket and March on Wall Street South) and Assembly.

This first effort during Obama 's second re-election in NC was only able to convene a few long-time individual activists and organizations. Despite a modest effort to connect with other workers assemblies developing in other cities in NC, these key activists were not able to establish regular Assembly meetings or develop a division of labor to carry out work.

The second effort post Trump's campaign/election was late 2015- early 2018. This effort benefited from some of the SWA Workers Schools' trainings providing a sharper understanding of an organizing methodology and the importance of developing worker cadres as core organizers of workplace committees and workers assemblies.



Then, after the election of Trump in 2016, white supremacists tried to organize a “Victory Kavalcade” in rural NC. We hosted a counter-rally, attracting over 2,000 in downtown Raleigh to clarify that this state does not belong to racists. Out of this rally, workers organizations and unions with a base were convened into a “Triangle People’s Assembly,” including people from Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill.

This Assembly brought together organizations, leaders and members of the NC Association of Educators Organize 2020 caucus, Fight for \$15 and a Union, NC Public Service Workers Union-UE Local 150, Duke Grad Student Union and Adjunct Union (SEIU), BWFJ, Muslims for Social Justice, Comite for Accion Popular and a few others. The assembly built several anti-racist rallies, including a mass rally at the airport as part of the “No Ban, No Wall” struggle after Trump tried to place a ban on all people from so-called “Muslim countries.”

Monthly assemblies across the 3-city area were held for 6 months after Trump’s election, organized by a functioning leadership committee across 8 organizations, but the pace of activities was too fast and led to exhaustion. This effort

dissipated because most jumped back into the work of their respective organizations. They did not, at the time, see the intersection of their various struggles as a priority. We also lacked a worker's solidarity campaign to help unite us.

The present effort (late 2019-present) is a result of lessons we shared and learned from the SWA Workers School and the Durham Workers Assembly work. The UE local 150 and SWA's Medicare For All (M4A) workplace campaigns had a significant impact on the development of the Raleigh Workers Assembly.

The Peoples World Newspaper, BWFJ and UE150 sponsored a labor forum in Raleigh on November 9, 2019. It brought together some 80 participants from trade unions and worker organizations wanting to help build a rank-and-file labor movement in NC and the South. Representatives from local immigrant rights organization, public sector union, graduate workers union, and Farmworkers Labor Organizing Committee spoke on a panel. Activists were present from several politically left organizations, including CPUSA, DSA, and IWW. Participants agreed to help build support for the M4A Campaign. It took on the form of a worker's assembly.

This M4A campaign was a new starting point for the development of the current Raleigh Workers Assembly (RWA). The RWA distributed M4A flyers at workplaces and held information pickets, a rally and press conference. In the initial organizing meetings, two UE 150 chapters participated: the NC State Grad Student workers and the Capital Area /Raleigh City Workers. There was also participation by left activists who were not organizing in their own workplaces, which turned out to be an

obstacle in terms of getting traction with workplace-based organizing.

The onset of COVID-19 made it difficult to meet but also presented an urgent need for workplace organizing. RWA developed a COVID-19 Worker Resource list and toolkit, and undertook a workplace campaign called "Safe Jobs Save Lives," with stickers, buttons, and a pamphlet on how to organize for safety protections. The Assembly formed a Political Education Subcommittee that organized several webinars on workplace organizing and historical context, and supported the formation of a new workplace organizing committee at Valley Proteins Corporation in Fayetteville.

The SWA's Amazon Solidarity Campaign has given the RWA a new sense of purpose in supporting the workers at the Amazon Fulfillment Center in Garner. A committee has formed to put out a regular newsletter, and done research. There was outreach to other workplaces in the Raleigh area.

We have learned that in order to build the RWA, we must have a committed cadre core and a regular system of communications and meetings that shapes member accountability and develops leadership beyond the initial core.



## **C. Durham Workers Assembly**

The Durham Workers Assembly was formed initially as an alliance of the three main Black worker organizations in Durham, NC during the 2017 municipal elections. NC Raise Up/Fight for \$15, National Domestic Workers Alliance-We Dream in Black and the Durham City Workers Union chapter of UE Local 150 hosted a joint candidate forum to hear the voices and demands of Black workers before the election.

Out of this forum sprouted a common demand to establish a Workers Rights Commission which would have a formal relationship with the City of Durham. The Commission was seen as a vehicle to ensure that proposals made would be followed up on by the City Manager, Mayor's Office and City Council.

There were concerns about forming a Workers Rights Commission. It could preempt the formation and engagement of Worker Organizing Committees, or become a tool for labor-management cooperation and a showpiece for management. It was decided that the group that won the formation of the Worker's Rights Commission would officially form as a Workers Assembly that would be an independent of the Commission. The WA would organize, educate and mobilize unified rank-and-file worker and community actions to enforce Commission proposals and worker struggles at other workplaces.

In December 2017, several workers organizations formed the Durham Workers Assembly: Duke Graduate Workers and Faculty Unions (SEIU Southern regions Local 26 & 27), AFSCME Local 77 representing Duke housekeeping and food service workers, ATU local of bus drivers at Duke

and the NC AFL-CIO, in addition to the 3 founding organizations and other independent workers.

Worker Speak-Outs were held monthly for workers to speak openly to other workers and allies about their various struggles. They found out that regardless of industry, they faced many of the same problems. These allowed workers to hear and learn from each other's struggles and learn they are not alone waging these struggles. The Durham Workers Assembly establish basic standards and expectations for workers to demand from all employers, which was developed into a Durham Workers Bill of Rights, which in November 2020 was officially adopted as a city ordinance by the City Council.

DWA was able to organize solidarity actions to support many workers in struggles, including:

- Helping outsourced public-school custodians win \$1.1 million from the county to be in-sourced and classified as public, county employees, qualifying for pension, higher wages, health care, and more job security.
- Supporting a dozen Latinx cleaners for a construction company to win over \$13,000 in stolen wages.
- Mobilizing to City Council supporting City workers' fight for a fair grievance procedure. These changes have been adopted by the WRC and are currently before the City Manager.
- Pushing back Wendy's fast-food boss from trying to fire a worker.

- Launching, in early 2019, a joint “Reclaiming our Time” campaign to fight for fair scheduling and paid time off.
- Forming a committee to help develop a roadmap for workers to organize around their issues. Workers gathered and studied employer handbooks and memos, listing needed policy changes, that workers used as an organizing tool.
- Making the May Day March and Labor Day Parades annual events for mobilizing worker participation.

#### **D. Charlotte Workers Assembly relaunched**

During this heightened time of emergency organizing for the needs and protection of our local workers due to COVID-19, several facilitators from Charlotte labor organizations (Charlotte City Workers Union-UE150, IATSE 322, Ironworkers, IBEW LU 379, Association of Flight Attendants, National Domestic Workers Alliance, IAMAW Victory Lodge 1725, APRI/Black Voters Matter, CharMeck Association of Educators, Amazonians United, Charlotte Metro DSA and other organized labor groups) decided to reconvene and relaunch Charlotte Workers' Assembly.

To speed up the relaunch, several of the original core members met to set expectations and debrief what could have gone better last time the assembly was active. We discovered that our assembly was highly dependent on just a few paid organizers. As they moved away or took on new endeavors the assembly work was put on the back burner and faded away. That is why we wanted to secure many organizers and rank-and-file workers to attend our

first three foundational meetings, building a broad and diverse group to ensure that the assembly has the critical mass it needs to succeed. The ad hoc steering committee wanted to give assembly participants the chance to voice what is affecting their workplace and let that guide the group's efforts.

The first meeting was simply an introduction and coming together to say who we are, before breaking into smaller groups to discuss the problems that we and our coworkers are experiencing. Next, breaking into small groups and coming back to share discussion takeaways with the whole group, we focused on how we can use our collective voice to organize. Digital outreach is good, but we need to hold rallies and flyer at workplaces and local hangouts to actually build our assembly. Finally, we used the input from the first two meetings to formulate specific calls to action that we can fight for in Charlotte. This included framing a general workers bill of rights that also included specifics for our current crisis, like extended COVID-19 protections for workers, hazard pay, provided PPE, extended sick leave, and alternative scheduling to limit exposure. We can also demand more than just workplace accommodations. We can use our power to protect workers when they are off the clock, including pressuring city and county officials to continue our moratorium on evictions, closing courts except for emergency business, stopping arrests for misdemeanors and making sure testing and other health services for COVID-19 are available and easy to use for Black and Brown workers.



## 6. What have we learned so far?

- Workers Assemblies must have connecting campaigns like the Safe Jobs Saves Lives Campaign in multiple workplaces with community support.
- WOCs should use available laws and US Constitutional provisions to defend against employer attacks on organizing.
- WAs should have collective leadership so that the majority of the work does not become centered around individuals.
- Some targeted workplaces are part of multinational corporations. Research should be done and contacts made with rank-and-file workers and unions at companies in other countries.
- Having an identifiable location in the community, like a worker's center, helps to establish the workers' movement as a community institution, making it more organic.

- The intensifying of the US economic crisis by the COVID-19 pandemic, its disproportionate impact on working-class Black, Brown and Indigenous people, and the state-sanctioned police killings of Black people, highlighted by the brutal cop killing of George Floyd in Minnesota, have awakened many about the relationship of the struggle against structural racism to the working-class struggle against capitalism. This is a historic moment in a stage of capitalist crisis for aligning these struggles and unifying the US working class.

## **7. What can we do during and after COVID-19?**

The coronavirus pandemic has hit workers hard. Many workplaces have been hotspots for the spread of the virus. Workers need safety protections more than ever. The “Safe Jobs Safe Lives” campaign is designed to help workers establish Workplace Organizing Committees to obtain needed protections. The WOC can then become a long-term resource for building worker power.

If you are a member of a worker’s organization or workers center, the first step is to target the workplaces of your members. If trying to organize, target at least 3 workplaces in a city or county to begin leafleting and making worker contacts.

Be sure to put phone and email contact info on the leaflet. After stating what organization, you belong to, ask the following questions, keeping in mind that the time will be short if leafleting takes place when workers are going to or leaving work.

- 1) Has COVID-19 hit your workplace?
- 2) Has the company provided workers adequate PPE, paid sick leave, hazardous pay?
- 3) Is your workplace unionized?
- 4) Do you have email and phone so we can contact you about a meeting?

Workers assemblies should have a strategic plan and a division of labor to help carry out and sustain the work involved in a campaign like this.

Immediate campaigns need to be connected to a long-term strategy about building workers power and social justice unionism. When demands are won, celebrate, but also point out the meaning of a victory and the other demands and committees needed to strengthen it. Always prepare workers for likely employer retaliations and counter attacks.

COVID-19 and the massive anti-racist struggles have helped raise mass consciousness for radical system change. WAs should figure out how to include some or all of the people's demands in their work life, and bring worker demands at the points of production and service to community struggles. WAs should recruit from these mobilizations and be an identified force promoting focused demands, inviting folks to educational forums (in person or virtual), and working to hold people's assemblies where community and social movement organizations can hammer out a program of struggle.

## **8. How can people get started in their local areas?**

The first step is to sit down and talk with your closest coworkers. Do it more than once. You can call it a series. Read this handbook together. What are your concerns? What is your experience so far? What change do you seek? At some point, this talking becomes an organizing committee.

The committee might be two or three people, might be more. No matter, as long as everyone agrees to build a worker's assembly and establish principles of unity. Then figure out how to recruit 10 people each from three or more workplaces. Start by identifying members of union locals who will talk with other union members and get the local to vote to sign on to building a worker's assembly.

Workers assemblies recruit allies to help target new workplaces and communities. Identify an issue that people care about, make a campaign to address that issue, and coordinate where possible with other people working on that issue. Build support for local struggles.

Issues like Medicare for All and safety during COVID-19 can connect the workplace to the community. For example, point out that COVID-19 spreads into communities from the workplaces. That's why the demand for PPE, hazard pay, paid sick leave and Medicare for All must be uncompromising worker and community demands.

With the huge number of foreign investments in the South in industries like auto, electronics, and meatpacking, it is very important that the Southern Workers Assembly connect with unions and worker organizations across the globe in building a global strategy.

With COVID-19 and the massive anti-racist struggle for system changes in policing, cuts in the military budget and against endless wars to address vital economic and social needs for working class and poor people, workers assemblies should become an independent political force struggling for self-determination and worker power across the South.

## **9. What about the far right?**

Hundreds of community and social movement organizations across the US organized and mobilized to defeat Donald Trump in the 2020 election. An election was against this racist, sexist, anti-immigrant, homophobic, imperialist, undemocratic, even fascist former president.<sup>5</sup> Opposition to the US far right is strong among Black and oppressed communities, as well as sectors of the white working class.

The interests of workers are at odds with both capitalist parties. Workers have major differences with Joe Biden and the Democratic party, around the prison and military industrial complex, US foreign policies and Medicare for All, for example. Yet the greater threat comes from the

*5. Fascism is a system of government led by a dictator who typically rules by forcefully and often violently suppressing opposition and criticism, controlling all industry and commerce, and promoting nationalism and often racism.*

openly racist and repressive hard line set by the Trump/Pence regime and its supporters, that still has influence in government in shaping government policies.

Labeling Black Lives Matter and struggles against racism as “Black Identity Extremists” and a terrorist threat, implementing the Muslim Ban, building the Mexican border wall, caging and separating children from their parents, and sending federal troops into Portland, Oregon: this record indicates an unprecedented level of open political repression by the US far right.

The far right seeks to create fear, to divide the working class, to silence Black workers. But working-class unity against corporate evil is a growing trend. Wildcat strikes, sick-outs and other job actions for PPE, paid sick leave and hazard pay show this. The police killing of George Floyd and the heavy impact of COVID-19 on Black workers and their communities have revealed conditions of structural racism and united communities in revolt.

The working class and oppressed communities need a worker’s program that makes strategic demands on Biden: Medicare for All, the PRO Act (collective bargaining rights for all workers), extended benefits for the unemployed and unhoused, free healthcare for people with COVID-19, hazardous pay for essential workers, cuts to the military budget, defunding and community control of police. Unity builds worker power which provides the leverage needed to achieve both workplace and political demands.

The SWA webinars are providing a platform for essential workers, a category defined by the COVID-19 pandemic that is highly concentrated with low-wage Black, Brown,

indigenous, immigrant, women gender non-conforming and disabled workers. This essential worker category provides an opportunity to give further meaning to the demands and struggles of those sections of the working class impacted by structural racism, sexism, white supremacy, and political, economic and social subjugation.

These workers are central to the SWA's efforts to build a worker's movement with a radical political consciousness that will connect workers throughout the South, nationally and even internationally.



## **10. How and why should workers contact the Southern Workers Assembly?**

Why contact us? We have resources to help in your struggles:

- A mailing list to spread the word
- Workers Schools to learn, network, and organize
- Webinars where workers tell their stories
- A website and Facebook page, again to spread the word
- Publications to read and study alone or in groups
- Media contacts for more publicity
- Experienced organizers who can lend a hand

How to contact us? By phone, text message, Facebook, email, or hard mail. Or talk to the person who gave you this handbook. See below for details.

**Phone:** 252-314-2363

**Email:** info@southernworker.org

**Hard mail:** PO Box 46263, Raleigh, NC 27620

**Website:** <http://southernworker.org>

**Twitter:** @SWA\_solidarity

**Facebook:** [facebook.com/SouthernWorkersAssembly](https://facebook.com/SouthernWorkersAssembly)

