

# No Cash, No Trash

## The Story of the Durham Sanitation Workers Strike

*By Dante Strobino*





On Wednesday, September 6, 2023, over seventy sanitation workers in Solid Waste Management in the City of Durham did not load their trucks in protest of low pay. On the first day of the action, only one garbage truck, out of a total of more than 40 trucks, went out on the routes that day. On an average day, city trucks pick up around 20 tons of garbage, yard waste, recycling and bulky items.

Members of the North Carolina Public Service Workers Union, UE Local 150, lead the action in response to inaction by city officials on three demands they have been organizing around for several months: 1) An immediate \$5000 bonus; 2) Payment to workers for work done outside of their job title; and 3) Hire all temporary workers. Hundreds of city workers across departments signed a petition circulating with these demands, which was presented to City Council on September 5, after other meetings with city leaders around their concerns.

***“There should be over 40 trucks on the road right now gathering trash and recycling. As far as I know, we’re all standing in solidarity together, and I don’t think any trucks went out.”***

- **Christopher Benjamin**, Durham Solid Waste worker

The next day, on Thursday, September 7, six supervisors were ordered to drive garbage trucks, and forced the six temporary laborers and the two new employees to get on the back of the trucks. Sanitation workers stayed united through the weekend, even under increasing pressure from management to return to work. Ultimately, they stayed out of work six days and returned to work on their own terms with their heads high, and with a huge boost to their internal solidarity, on Tuesday, September 12.

The action galvanized deep and wide community, faith and labor support across all of Durham, the state and the nation, ultimately winning \$6.5 million in bonuses for the city's lowest paid workers. It has the potential to be a spark for municipal and other workers who are in anti-union South to launch their own fight back campaigns. Workers successfully told their stories about understaffing and low wages in the context of an unprecedented local housing crisis and deepening gentrification in Durham that has pushed out many working families, who can no longer afford to live in the city limits. Through out much of the pandemic, nearly a thousand working families were evicted monthly from their rental properties across Durham.

Another material reality that workers felt was the increasing understaffing. Vacancies in many departments continued to increase since the "Great Resignation". In Public Works alone, where there are 177 positions, there were less than 50 workers doing the work.

Even though public sector strikes are technically illegal, over the course of the last few years, sanitation workers have struck in Raleigh (2006), Greenville, NC (2011), Virginia Beach (2020) and Elizabeth City (2021). In contrast to other public sector workers in the three states that ban public sector collective bargaining (South Carolina, North Carolina and Virginia), sanitation workers continue to prove to be a militant leading force in taking collective action on the job. With the exception of the sick-out lead by NC Association of Educators on May Day, International Workers Day, May 1, 2019 where tens of thousands of educators across the state did not

go to work, and many marched on the state legislature in Raleigh, these are the only public sector strikes in recent years. The right collectively bargain was won in many states in the 1970's directly as a result of public workers going on strike and organizing mass collective action.

Surprisingly, even though Durham has the most progressive city council in the state, the city worker's wages have lagged in recent years. Durham remains the lowest paid municipalities in North Carolina, particularly for sanitation workers. As of October 1, 2023, here are the starting wages for sanitation workers compared to other cities, including many smaller cities:

- Durham - \$39, 141
- Burlington - \$40, 500
- Greensboro - \$43,000
- Greenville - \$41,000
- Raleigh - \$41,117
- Rocky Mount - \$40,516
- Charlotte - \$45,760

According to a report issued by GoBankingRates (not exactly a pro-worker mouthpiece) in September 2023, a family of four needs to have an income of \$84,957 to live comfortably in North Carolina. That is equivalent to two income earners both making at least \$20 per hour.

Cities in North Carolina generally keep close to 25% of the total General Fund, unspent to help appease Wall Street. These billionaire bankers hold cities hostage to these exorbitant bank reserves lending them large money in the form of bonds, that then must be paid back based on interest rates that they set. Wall Street demands these reserves and other austerity measures in their annual bond rating assessments.

At the end of the FY2023, the city had over \$74 million in reserves, over 31% of their annual budget. The union demand – to give



*Press conference at Solid Waste Management parking lot on September 5.*

every worker that earns under \$75,000 per year a \$5,000 bonus - would cost around \$8 million. The city clearly can responsibly spend this money and have plenty to roll over into the current fiscal year for unexpected one-time expenditures. Not to mention, that much of this was directly from the workers sweat and hard work due to vacant positions. At the end of the fiscal year, the city had \$5.4 million in lapsed salary funds. The previous year, the city had spent nearly \$3 million in lapsed salaries for mid-year payments to the Police department.

In this pamphlet, I seek to tell the story of the campaign, from the months that lead up to the strike, to the months that followed. There are many lessons learned that we wish to share as collective property for others in the heat of class struggle.

# The Rent is Too High, and the Wages are Too Low

One of the driving factors behind the strike was that many city workers, while servicing the City of Durham, cannot afford to live here. A major example of this is one of the strike leaders was born and raised in Durham. He has many generations of family from Durham. However, he can't afford to live in Durham, and is forced to raise his young Black children in Klu Klux Klan country in Alamance County, in Haw River nearly 45 minutes away from his worksite. His situation is not unique. Many other commute to Knightdale, Graham, Burlington, living mostly in surrounding Granville and Alamance counties.

Prior to the pandemic's start in Durham (March 2020) median rent listings ranged from \$600 to \$1100 per month. From April 2020 to June 2023 they have never dropped below \$1300 and been as high as \$1700 per month. Forget trying to buy a house. Median home sale prices in Durham's poorest neighborhoods increased by 60% from 2015 to 2020, from \$118,723 to \$190,652. They have steeply risen since 2020 even further out of reach on a city worker's salary.

## The committed few

In the spring of 2023 very few workers were attending the monthly Durham city chapter union meetings. Attendance was not able to even establish a quorum at union meetings. But there was a solid core group of four workers.

In the two years prior, the union had maintained quarterly meet and confer sessions with the City Manager Wanda Page's office

and Human Resources Director. These meetings largely centered around the union's proposals for an improved grievance procedure.

## **Last Minute Mobilization to Final Budget Hearing**

In early June, the Professional Fire Fighters of Durham IAF Local 668, reached out to UE150 to ask if we had any plans for the final budget hearing on June 20. City Manager Wanda Page was proposing a 2% cost-of-living adjustment and a 4-6% Step Increase for workers. However, as the IAF pointed out, that did not account for wage freeze and depreciation over the pandemic due to rising cost-of-living and inflation.

The Step Pay promised to workers was frozen for the first two years of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. Workers did receive a 2% increase in this period, as well as COVID hazard pay bonuses. Since 2019 city workers have seen raises of 15% however the cost-of-living has gone up 23%. That means workers have witnessed an overall 8% pay cut in last 4 years.

## **We just need one vote for this to pass!**

Throughout the spring, the Firefighters Union had been attending city council meetings to speak out in support of a plan to pay workers for the two years of Step Plan pay missed during the pandemic, plus enough to overcome recent inflation. This plan would cost the city a total of \$17 Million, which council claims would require 4 cent property tax increase.

On June 20, a small group of UE150 core leaders attended the City Council Budget Hearing. The IAF mobilized around twenty union

members, all wearing blue union shirts and occupying the first three rows of seats inside the chamber. A handful of UE150 members, along with a few IAF members and several community supporters spoke out in favor of the IAF's demands.

However, Mayor Elaine O'Neal pulled an unfortunate stunt. Even before the workers and community could testify, to build support for their demands, Mayor O'Neal, at the beginning of the meeting, inserted to the agenda a vote on this proposal. Council members had reported that they would not support the proposal, yet Mayor O'Neal chose a ceremonious vote, which lost with a vote of 3 'for' and 4 'against'.

Mayor Pro Tempore Mark Anthony Middleton accused Mayor O'Neal of performative politics and being out of order. It is hard to see the Mayor's action outside the context of the political theater leading up to the November municipal elections.

While many workers did not attend this meeting in person, many did tune in and watch the meeting virtually on YouTube. The news spread very quickly that this 16-18% raise failed to pass by only one vote. The hope of this proposal passing elevated workers spirits.

## The Art of Agitation

Over the week of June 23 through 27, UE organized a "Saladin Muhammad Organizing Blitz", in honor of the late UE International Representative and Black freedom fighter. Members from four of UE's newly organized graduate worker locals traveled to North Carolina to join the blitz and support Local 150's efforts. Graduate workers from the University of Minnesota, Johns Hopkins, Stanford, and Northwestern worked with Local 150 rank-and-file members and staff throughout the week to have conversations with workers about their conditions and the importance of building a strong union.





*Participants in the organizing blitz in Durham on June 23, 2023*

The blitz targeted municipal workers in Durham, Greensboro and Raleigh.

***The Saladin Muhammad Blitz  
engaged over 2000 workers,  
resulting in 305 new phone numbers  
and 67 new union members.***

The leaflets circulated to thousands of workers agitated around the narrow failing to pass a serious wage increase, along with the pay increases received by Police and Fire. That week, blitz participants made hundreds of follow-up phone calls to have organizing conversations with workers. These conversations continued to agitate workers on these issues, and move them into common action.

The Thursday of the blitz, around 25 Durham city workers, mostly from the sanitation department, attended the union meeting. This was the largest union membership meeting in Durham in many years. From this meeting, workers agreed that they could not win a salary increase in the near future, given that the budget was already

decided. However, workers did agree to launch a petition.

Key worker leaders were identified in all solid waste divisions including garbage, recycling, yard waste and bulky. Workers immediately began circulating the petition at work. Within the first week, nearly all sanitation workers had signed the petitions. There was much less support from workers in other departments, with the Water department (the city's largest department) workers noticeably missing from the meetings. Workers in Public Works, General Services and Park and Recreation departments were able to circulate the petition, but with less success than Solid Waste.

Workers had weekly meetings directly following the blitz to report developments and keep the momentum going. Participation in these meetings remained modestly high for sanitation workers, with nearly a quarter of the department attending most meetings.

## The Money Is There

As in most union campaigns, the boss has the money to meet the demands of the workers. They choose not to give it to workers to prioritize other projects. In this case, the City has most recently funded two programs that relate to police brutality and gun violence in our communities.

The first – ShotSpotter - is a program that is highly controversial and has been disavowed in other cities like Atlanta in recent years. ShotSpotter is a “Gunfire Detection” technology that utilizes acoustic sensors, or microphones, that are placed in a designated area of deployment. Once the sensors detect gunfire, this then begins the process of notifying the Durham Police Department. The program is still under a pilot program that is set to expire December 2023. There is little to no evidence that the program has decreased gun violence as intended. It's cost is roughly \$210,000 a year.

The other – the HEART program – has wide spread support from

the community and has been developed over several years of work by the Community-led Safety and Wellness Task Force, including detailed analysis by the Research Triangle Institute about the needs requested from 911 calls, which don't always need an armed police response. According to the City's budget documents:

In June 2022, the newly-formed Safety Department launched three crisis response programs under the brand HEART (Holistic Empathetic Assistance Response Teams): Crisis Call Diversion (CCD), embeds licensed mental health clinicians into Durham's 9-1-1 call center to triage, assess, and respond to behavioral and mental health related calls. The program also sends social workers and EMT's to homes where they are needed, rather than armed police.

This program was expanded in the FY 23-24 budget from \$4.1 million spent last fiscal year to \$6.4 million this year. That budget included 27 new hires. The full increase would allow them to triple their call volume to 13,600 calls per year. That's 10% of all 911 calls.

Much political capital was put into the passing of these programs.

## **Meetings with city council to build support for the union's demands**

In August, union members met with five City Council members to deliver over 300 petition signatures and explain their demands. While most expressed support for a bonus, not all were committed to the full \$5,000.

Council members that had historically been the union's strongest allies chose to be over-reliant on recommendations from the city's staff including their budget and revenue offices. They failed to acknowledge that they shifting terrain, lead by Wall Street, of

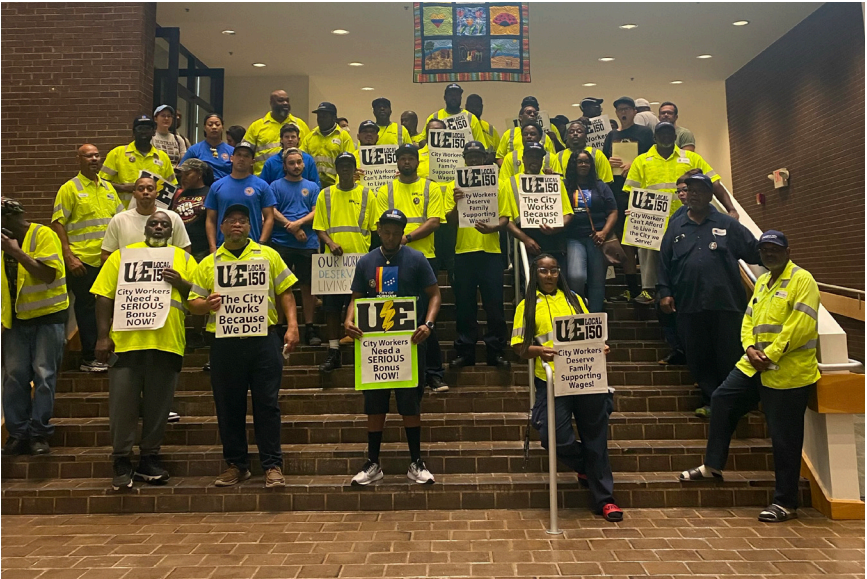
claiming to need more and more money in reserves every year was a political decision they were making, in consultation with the city's accountants. They claimed to be the responsible ones, and that the workers' demands were not responsible decision for the city's future financial outlook.

During the meetings, council members implored the workers to show up in big numbers at the city council meetings to make their demands known. They even stated that if workers did not get what they wanted, they should consider not going to work, implying support for a strike of city workers. Workers took these recommendations seriously.

During one meeting, however, Mayor O'Neal twice pitted the HEART program against the demands of the workers, implying that money spent on it was not wise, and was better spent on the workers wages. On her way out of the building, the Mayor again pointed to a HEART sign and said "there is \$9 million right there", even though budget documents showed the program costing much less.

## **September 5: Workers Deliver Petitions at City Council meeting**

After these meetings with five of the council members, workers felt they had an opportunity to gain the four votes they needed to support their demands. Workers in Solid Waste immediately went back to work and convened meetings after work in the Solid Waste parking lot and auditorium to discuss tactics. Workers decided that they would not give City Council even a month to solve the issue, after delivering their demands. They felt this would allow the city administration too much time to undermine the internal solidarity amongst workers to take more heightened actions, such as with-



*City workers rally inside City Hall lobby before council meeting on Sept. 5.*

holding their labor.

They decided they would give the city two weeks notice. They worked out detailed plans about who would lead each of the four sections in Solid Waste – garbage, recycling, yard waste and bulky – should the date come for a workplace action.

At the following union meeting, workers agreed to attend the September 5 city council meeting with the intention to deliver their petitions and put the city on notice. Before that council meeting, the union held a rally and press conference. Workers then marched inside City Hall together and occupied the foyer.

In their bright neon yellow work uniforms, workers packed the council chambers, taking up many of the seats. After one sanitation worker spoke to the demands of the union, workers were shocked at the responses. Every council member spoke in support of their demands, but none offered any next step. Upset, workers piled out of the meeting and gathered across the street.

As workers gathered, they began to collectively agree that the momentum was with them at the moment. They needed to strike while it was hot. After much back and forth about tactics and timing, the ultimately agreed to all show up at work the next morning but not load their trucks. The calls went out.

## September 6: The Strike begins.

Starting around 5:30am on the morning of Wednesday, September 6, workers in Solid Waste Management began to gather in the parking lot and not walk up the hill to clock in. Even the six temps that came to work that day did not go through the “employees only” fence to clock in. In all, sixty two workers came in to work that day and stood together, deciding to not hit the clock. In addition to sanitation workers, two workers from Public Works, a crew from General Services and a few other workers from other departments, all union members, joined Solid Waste workers to stand down in the parking lot. They were also joined by a handful of community supporters from the Durham Workers Assembly. Several other sanitation workers did not come in to work at all that morning. By 7:00am, when everyone was to have started work, only one operator clocked into work that morning.

An hour later, upon being contacted, the press arrived. As workers gathered in the parking lot, a worker again spoke on behalf of the group.

Shortly after the press conference, the City Manager Wanda Page and Deputy City Manager Bertha Johnson showed up to meet with the workers. During this meeting, Page was a hard ‘no’ on everything. She claimed the budget had been decided already and there was nothing she could do about wages and bonuses. Workers pressed her hard, but she refused to budge. This only infuriated the workers more, antagonizing them to stay out of work longer to

prove their point.

After this meeting, middle management then invited all the striking workers in the auditorium for a meeting. At this meeting, workers were told that if they individually chose to not show up at work that they must simply notify their supervisor and sick or vacation time could be used.

As workers gathered in the parking lot, tensions began to arise. Some workers spoke about their worry of not being paid for the day, and not being able to support their family if out of work with no pay. This fear began to spread. However, a worker leader addressed the crowd challenging them to not look at this as individuals, but as a community as a whole. His fierce energy and decisive leadership on this question really motivated workers to stick together and stick out the strike for as many days as necessary.

Management began to strategize about how to disempower workers. Amongst their tactics, was to demand that if workers were to be paid sick leave for the day, they could not be seen on city property. Wanting to maintain their collective presence, workers gathered across the street on the right-of-way. They maintained a visible vigil in front of the city's fueling station. Throughout the afternoon, many other city trucks from other departments such as water, parks, public works and fire drove past, many honking their horns or pumping their fists in support. At one point, an entire Fire crew jumped out of the truck to shake everyone's hands. These IAF union members congratulated and thanked the sanitation workers for taking their stand for everyone.

Throughout the day, as the news spread on mainstream and social media, community allies and elected officials came out to the rally across from Solid Waste. Many other candidates for city council also attended, along with Durham Workers Assembly members. Many brought water and food donations to support the workers.

# ‘Facts Not Feelings’

The next day, Thursday, September 7, workers showed up similarly and stood together by 6:30am in the Solid Waste parking lot. This time, management was able to strong arm the two new hires along with the six temporary employees to load the trucks being driven by the six supervisors. Nearly all other workers held the line and refused to work another day.

That afternoon, there was a city council work session. Most the entire sanitation department attended the meeting together to show their presence and reiterate their demands. Speaking on behalf of city workers was six (6) sanitation workers along with a fire fighter. Several other community members also spoke out in favor of the workers’ demands.

During that meeting, council members pressed City Manager to meet the workers demands. However, embarrassingly, council members also asked basic questions about the functioning of the budget including the possibility to rescinding programs approved in the budget, and passing additional wage increases, that would require reoccurring funding. Out of this meeting, the City Manager was tasked with drafting a proposal for the workers bonuses, with little to no framework. Council member Middleton continued his condescending remarks coaching workers on how to be responsible with their own household budgets.

The next morning, Friday, September 8, as workers were commuting to work early that morning supervisors began sending text messages to workers that if they did not report to work that day it would be leave without pay. They referencing department policy that requires a doctor’s note for being out of work 3 days or longer. Out of fear of losing pay, and potentially being disciplined, a handful of workers returned to work, but the vast majority remained steadfast and continued the picket line.

It was clear that management was intentionally mis-quoting policy



to intimidate workers. Additionally, many workers were not clear on what exactly the sick leave and attendance policy stated. Under increasing pressure, workers continued to express their fear of losing their jobs as they gathered. Exposing these lies, a mantra arose from the workers “Facts Not Feelings.” They encouraged each other to dig deeper, study policy and look at the true facts rather than relying on subjective feelings when making decisions.

One worker was able to produce city-wide sick leave and attendance policy to support their workers and encourage them to stay out. However, there was rumblings that Solid Waste department policy may be more specific and slightly different. This confusion, however, still did not deter workers from continuing their work stoppage. Later that afternoon, a worker was able to produce the department policy, which was able to be copied by the union and shared around with all workers. For instance, city policy stated that workers must “contact” their supervisor if intending to be out sick, but Solid Waste policy required they actually “call” their supervisor. Department policy also spelled out specific number of hours missed from work before disciplinary action was to be taken. Being able to be educated and read their own policy proved really critical to maintain workers confidence in both their own actions, but also the support they were given by the union. Many had never read the policy since they were first hired, but rather relied on the interpretation from their direct supervisors, which all applied the policy differently.

One supervisor directly threatened the workers for not coming into work, while others were openly supportive of the strike. This also created uneven sentiments amongst the workers about how many days they felt comfortable remaining out of work. However, physically gathering together and able to share with each other this unequal enforcement of policy was an important lesson for all workers involved.

Workers were encouraged to contact their own personal doctors to get sick notes, which many did.

# Building Mass Community Support

Later that afternoon, workers moved from Solid Waste property and decided to gather for a community support rally in downtown Durham at the People's Plaza, by the bull statue. Many community supporters from various organizations showed up in solidarity with workers that afternoon.

From this meeting, under the threat of not being paid while out of work, the union launched a GoFundMe fundraiser page to collect funds to directly aid the workers. Initially set for a goal of \$10,000, this goal was met within 24 hour. Through the next couple of day, the community and other labor organizations donated nearly \$55,000 to the workers. Having this money in the bank, was also a huge morale booster for the striking workers. Without the threat of leave without pay, it freed them up to continue their action. In the end, when workers were ultimately denied pay for days off work, the fundraiser covered nearly the exact amount of lost wages for the workers. Workers were paid an even amount, depending on the number of days staying out of work.

That weekend, feeling increasing pressure from the community to have their trash collected, the City Manager contracted with both GFL and Republic private sanitation companies to have trash collected. Each of these companies, however, only had a handful of trucks. None of their trucks were the side-loader automation trucks. This meant that the workers driving these trucks had to get out of the truck at each house and physically wheel the cans to the back of the truck to be dumped. They also grabbed recycling bins and mixed in with the garbage.

On an average day, an automation driver can pick up 800-1000 cans each. These trucks were likely only able to pick up a few hundred cans daily. In combination with the small fleet, this meant that without the city workforce, these private contractors only collected



a small nominal amount of garbage, leaving the majority of the city with no trash collection through the weekend. No one had yard waste, recycling or bulky items picked up at all that week.

Community supporters began making their own signs and taping them to their garbage cans in solidarity with the workers. Signs read “I can’t wait to throw this sign away! Support Fair Wages for City of Durham workers!” and “I heart sanitation workers”. These signs appeared in every neighborhood across the city.

With the support of community and labor allies in the Durham Workers Assembly, the union was able to get yard signs printed up. Over 800 yard signs were distributed in the manner of just a few days. Young people put together a sound truck that blasted support for the city workers demands on loud speakers as they drove through neighborhoods distributing signs. This was a tactic repeated from the 2006 Raleigh sanitation strike.

A committee was put together to do outreach to small businesses. As a result signs were hung in hundreds of windows across town and over 60 small businesses signed on to a letter to the city council supporting the workers’ demands.

Faith allies were also outreached to across Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities.

# Spreading the Movement Statewide

It has always been the methodology of UE150 that we cannot just organize at just one workplace at a time. Rather, we must build worker committees in key workplaces in a given industry linked with other worker leaders in that same industry across the state. Since the 2006 sanitation workers strike, UE150 has built a Municipal Council that links together city workers from Charlotte, Durham, Greensboro, Rocky Mount and Raleigh, where we have active chapters of the union. We also agitate and reach out to workers in others cities from time to time like Winston Salem, Greenville, Goldsboro, Wilson and Chapel Hill, where we have a history of leafletting at the municipal worksites.

We know that cities often look to each other to determine what is acceptable. This not only applies to the annual budget process when they are setting wages, tax rates and more, but also to policies that govern their employees.



As part of our community and faith outreach to allies across the state, we had a conversation with Rev. Nelson Johnson, from the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro. Since the 1960's, Rev. Johnson has a long history of standing with sanitation workers in particular, including in Greensboro in late 1970's when sanitation workers tried to organize a union and were all fired.

Rev. Johnson suggested that we reach out to municipal workers across North Carolina and bring them into Durham to benefit from the momentum and energy. We did just that. We invited workers to Durham for a mass support rally on the evening of Monday, September 11.

On Monday, September 11 the vast majority of sanitation workers remained out of work. That morning, they met again, as they did each morning to discuss strategy and tactics. Under intense pressure from management to get back to work with threats of leave without pay, and also seeing the private contractors taking over their work over the weekend, workers discussed the option of going back to work Tuesday. After much discussion, in which a few wanted to stay out of work longer until the city had reached agreement on the bonuses, workers decided they wanted to go back to work. They made this decision not because they were satisfied or trusted the city, but as an act of solidarity with the community, knowing that trash piling up can be a safety hazard for families.

***“We are here because of our low pay. We are not getting paid for the hazardous work that we do. The Solid Waste department has threatened us with leave without pay. We don’t think that is fair. We are going to do what we have to do to get our pay, because we deserve it. We are gonna clean the city up. That is for the citizens. It is not because we are giving up, because we are not giving up.”***

**- Herman Moore, Durham solid waste operator**

At the rally that evening city workers from Raleigh and Rocky Mount did attend the rally in support of Durham workers. Hundreds of community supporters attended the rally, overflowing from the plaza outside of City Hall and congesting the streets.

**“I see someone holding a sign that has Martin Luther King on it. You know MLK died in Memphis arguing this same point. That was 1968. It is 2023 and we are still fighting.”**

- **Mike Robinson**, Raleigh sanitation worker and UE150 leader stated to the crowd

The union also developed literature about the Durham strike that had specific calls to action for city workers in cities across the state. Thousands of these leaflets were distributed in Raleigh, Greensboro, Charlotte, Goldsboro, Wilson and Rocky Mount. A critical part of the rally was also movement cultural art featuring the Fruit of Labor Singing Ensemble.

## **City Manager Bargains over YouTube**

Even though collective bargaining is banned by state law, this action was another example of how workers power can still force public employers to bargain with us. Strong internal worker organization supported by broad community support can force governments into public bargaining. Even if no firm contract is reached at the end of the deal, there is a back-and-forth that arrives at a happy middle that is in-fact bargaining.

On the evening of Friday, September 15, City Manager Wanda Page announced her first counter offer to the union's demands via a video on YouTube. In this video, she proposed bonus payments for Full-time Employees:

- Gross salaries are less than \$57,000 annually: \$3,000 bonus
  - Gross salaries are between \$57,000 - \$90,000 annually: \$2,500 bonus
  - Gross salaries are more than \$90,000 annually: \$2,000
- Part-time Employees would all receive \$1,000 bonus.

These one-time bonuses would use approximately \$6.5 million of the city's fund balance.

A few Durham worker leaders were up in Pittsburgh at the UE National Convention. That evening the union convened an emergency zoom meeting to discuss the city's proposals. A strong number of workers attended the meeting and had a rigorous discussion for over two hours. Members of the union decided to sticking with the demand for the \$5,000 bonus for all city employees making less than \$75,000. While most all our members earn between \$40,000-60,000 per year, there was one key worker leader, in another department, whose salary is \$73,000. In solidarity with them, \$75,000 was agreed upon as the cut-off for the full bonus.

Plus, the city could conceivably pay out the \$5,000 to the 1,300 workers below this salary and still keep within the \$6.5 million they had on the table.

The union released its counter proposal on social media and via press release. Copies were also emailed to the City Council, City Manager and administration. This was public bargaining. The City posted the City Manager's proposals on their social media sites. On Instagram, over 30 community members spontaneously responded with comments challenging the City Manager to increase the bonus amount. The community's outpour of support was a powerful testament to the deep solidarity across town.

The next Monday, city workers and allies again packed the city council chambers, raising up the demands of the workers, and stating clearly that the City Manager's proposals were unacceptable.

## **Local Elections Caught in Crosshairs of Worker Action**

On September 27th, the union hosted a local election forum, inviting all the candidates for Mayor and City Council at Lyon Park Community Center, in the West End, a historically African American neighborhood in central Durham. Six Mayoral candidates and nine city council candidates attended the forum.

Workers were prepared to ask candidates questions about their support for their wage increases, work place safety, affordable housing and union rights.

After the forum, several workers commented that they had never bothered to register to vote in the past. They felt it would either make no difference, or was just an outright sham. The failures of capitalist democracy in the US, especially in the South, are deep and glaring.

Engaging in political action independent of the Democratic Party, is a core principle of UE's practice. Too many liberal organizations and unions get pulled into the momentum of the Democratic Party, and lose sight of the demands of the working class and oppressed people. They never hold the Party accountable to their member's needs. This leaves workers feeling disconnected, and they tune out.

The union used this electoral arena to advance the demands of the striking workers, not to mindlessly endorse candidates. We do not endorse candidates just because there is a seat open and hoping to fill with the "lesser of two evils". Rather, we endorse candidates that we know are wholeheartedly behind our program of demands and



have a track record of defending workers interests. If no one fits the bill, then we don't endorse.

We don't give our members hard-earned money to candidates' campaigns. Instead we support them by people power such as supporting door-to-door canvassing, working the polls, distributing literature at our workplaces and putting out yard signs in our communities.

## Meet-n-Confer with the City Manager



The next day, September 28th, the Durham City Workers Union had our quarterly meet-n-confer with the City Manager Wanda Page and HR Director Robin Wynn. In this meeting, there was much heated discussion about spending the city's reserve funds to meet the immediate needs of the workers.

Just prior to this meeting Page had travelled to New York to meet with the bond rating agencies on Wall Street to confirm the city's tax lending status and rates. The City was approved of this highest AAA bond rating possible. This rate was locked in for a year. During the meeting, the union pressed the Manager about her original proposal for \$6.58 million which would dip the overall fund balance below 25% to 24.71%. The union proposal drops it only to

24.25%. This challenged the idea that the 25% is a magic number. Additionally, we pointed out that labor unrest an important factor that bond rating agencies consider when making their decisions. Since the city has a stable tax base, with a growing property value and property tax, it should help the rating.

Page claimed that cyber security was more relevant to bond ratings than labor unrest. She did reveal that budgeted income from sales tax went from \$90 million to \$99 million in the last year.

# City Manager Makes A Final Proposal

On the evening of September 29, the City Manager again offered her proposals by posting them on the City’s website. There was to be a vote at the following city council work session on October 5. At the earlier city council meeting, the limit was set to \$6.5 million on total bonuses. The City Manager was tasked with spreading the money out more towards the lower paid city workers. She proposed the following three options:

## Options

### Option 1

<60% AMI	>60%-80% AMI	>80%-100% AMI	>100%-120% AMI	>120%-150% AMI	>150% AMI	
<\$42,480	\$42,481-\$56,650	\$56,651-\$70,810	\$70,811-\$84,970	\$84,971-\$106,210	>\$106,211	PT
\$5,000	\$5,000	\$3,500	\$500	\$500	\$500	\$500

### Option 2

<60% AMI	>60%-80% AMI	>80%-100% AMI	>100%-120% AMI	>120%-150% AMI	>150% AMI	
<\$42,480	\$42,481-\$56,650	\$56,651-\$70,810	\$70,811-\$84,970	\$84,971-\$106,210	>\$106,211	PT
\$5,000	\$4,000	\$2,750	\$2,750	\$500	\$500	\$1,000

### Option 3

<60% AMI	>60%-80% AMI	>80%-100% AMI	>100%-120% AMI	>120%-150% AMI	>150% AMI	
<\$42,480	\$42,481-\$56,650	\$56,651-\$70,810	\$70,811-\$84,970	\$84,971-\$106,210	>\$106,211	PT
\$5,000	\$3,750	\$2,500	\$2,500	\$2,000	\$500	\$1,000



On Thursday, October 5, union members mobilized to attend and speak out at the work session.

George Bacote, sanitation worker explained to the Council members why we are asking for \$5000.

***“I want to explain why we are asking for \$5,000. There are many city workers that can’t afford to live in Durham. There are city workers that are homeless. Some are living in a hotels and can’t even afford an apartment. Others can’t afford to own a car. With \$5,000 people could use that for a down payment and first month’s rent in an apartment. Many of us need to get out of a hole. The one time bonus can help us get there.”***

**- George Bacote**

At that meeting a Lieutenant in the Fire Department, who actively spoke out against his own's unions proposal, also spoke out for those making over \$70,811 to receive a significant bonus, and not just \$500 as proposed in Option 1. His reason was that he works on a truck with workers making significantly less. In his mind, a bonus that heavily weighted towards the low wage workers would cause divisions in the work force.

No one in City Council dias challenged this notion. As far as we know, there is no other departments where you have workers making over \$70,000 per year in the same work vehicle as those making less than \$42,000. That alone occurs in the Fire Department. Based on this rational, the city council voted to pass option 3, which would provide a strong majority of UE150 union members \$1,250 to \$1,000 less than option 1. After the vote, union members went outside and spoke at a press conference, where they claimed victory for \$6.5 million going into the pockets of city workers.

## Note on Leadership

Finally, one of the major lessons was that the folks before the strike who were the internal leaders and the most outspoken, were not necessarily the leaders at the end of the struggle. Workers throughout the strike played various roles. Some folks are more willing to be out front a speak. But those aren't always the ones that do the behind-the-scenes organizing. They are also not usually the ones that show up at union meetings to have collective discussions and make plans with their co-workers.

