

Southern Worker Justice

Newsletter of the Southern Worker Justice Campaign

southernworkerjustice.org

Durham City Workers Win \$6.5 MILL Bonuses After Historic 6-day Sanitation Strike! *Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win!*



Sanitation workers stand down on September 6, 2023

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.

“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,” said **Christopher Benjamin**, a City of Durham Solid Waste worker. “We’re going to make a stand until they come and talk to us, and then we can move forward with that process.”

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.

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.

Durham Strike Builds Broad Community & Faith Support, Pushes Statewide Movement!



Durham Sanitation workers at Press Conference on Oct 5 after winning \$6.5 million in bonuses after 6-day stand down.

On October 5, Durham City Council voted to award city workers \$6.5 Million in bonuses, after their 6-day stand down in early September. However, this fight would not have been won without massive community and faith support. City workers across the state are also taking advantage of this to advance their fights.

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 SWJC 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. Over \$55,000 was raised in a GoFundMe by community donations to help workers

with lost pay.

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.

At the September 11 rally, a call was put out to city workers statewide to come into Durham to gain inspiration from the momentum. City workers from Raleigh and Rocky Mount did attend the rally. Raleigh sanitation worker and UE150 leader **Mike Robinson** stated to the crowd, “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.”

The SWJC also developed literature about the Durham strike that had specific calls to action for city workers in city’s across the state. Thousands of these leaflets were distributed in Raleigh, Greensboro, Charlotte, Goldsboro, Wilson and Rocky Mount.

Charlotte City Workers Win \$22 per hour and Advance Fight for “Workers Bill of Rights”



Pictured above (right), Charlotte city workers march on May 8 2023 demanding a raise to \$22 per hour. (Above Left) Charlotte sanitation, water department and fire department works unite for campaign to win “Workers Bill of Rights”

After an aggressive campaign throughout the spring of 2023, on May 8, Charlotte city workers Union rallied and marched in the streets from Marshall Park to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Government Center in Uptown Charlotte chanting “When city workers are under attack, what do we do? Stand up, fight back!”

City Workers from departments around the city went to the Charlotte City Council meeting — against the advice of department heads and supervisors — to demand higher raises than the 6% raise being proposed in the city budget. After seven workers spoke at the May 8th budget hearing, Charlotte City Council members decided to adjust the budget. Quoting comments made by city workers, they came up with the following new budget recommendation based on the comments and needs of city workers.

The new recommended budget increases the minimum wage to \$22 per hour, and grants 11% raises for workers making under \$41,600.00 per year.

Workers Unite for ‘Bill of Rights’

On October 23, members of UE Local 150 Charlotte City Workers Union and the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 660 marched together from Marshall Park into the City Council chambers to demand a Workers Bill of Rights. The SWJC staff, Kass Ottley, played a critical role in bringing these groups together to show the City of Charlotte what essential workers united for workers rights looks like. Many workers from Solid Waste, Water and Fire departments spoke at the

Council meeting to demand passage of a bill of rights including:

- Passing a Civil Service Board for All Workers
- Union representation in Grievance Hearings
- Union access to new hire orientations,
- and more!

The organizations signed on to a joint letter that read:

For many years, both our organizations have been actively voicing concerns about the mistreatment of our fellow workers at the hands of department heads and certain city staff members who have been complicit in covering up and excusing wrongdoings. We are aware that you, esteemed members of Charlotte City Council, have received letters and complaints from employees across various departments highlighting the pervasive mistreatment they endure.

It is disheartening to know that almost all of you, our city council representatives, have publicly acknowledged or privately conveyed your frustration regarding the withholding and manipulation of information by city staff. Assistant City Manager Cagle has also acknowledged the existence of a culture of silence where workers are not only afraid to speak up about injustices they face within the workplace, they do not even feel safe to bring up safety issues for fear of retaliation from management.

You can no longer sit idly by and expect the wrong doers to police themselves, we urge you to take immediate action and pass the Workers Bill of Rights.

Portsmouth Set to Pass New Collective Bargaining Ordinance on November 14

New law allows workers to Join Union & Bargain with City Manager for the First Time in History!

The SWJC worked with the Fire Fighters Union in Portsmouth, VA to build support from the City Council the last few months to pass a collective bargaining ordinance. It would allow ALL city workers the right to join a union and bargain with the City Manager over wages, working conditions and benefits! The SWJC is organizing city workers in Public Works, General Services, Public Utilities, Behavioral and Social Services to advance their rights and increase pay. Once organized, these workers will have a real seat at the table! If we don't, workers will continue to get crumbs as they fall off the table.

In recent months, nine other local governments across Virginia have passed similar ordinances. Yet, to date none of the cities in the Black-belt Hampton Roads area have enacted collective bargaining. The SWJC is organizing workers in four Hampton Roads cities including Virginia Beach, Newport News, Portsmouth and Norfolk to win these rights.

City workers across Hampton Roads Area Organize with SWJC!



Collective Bargaining Supports Working Families

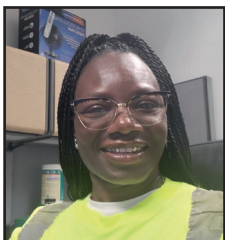
"A union with collective bargaining is needed for our workers due to the fact that cost of living is steady rising. Food prices and rent continue to rise. We are losing great workers to the private sector due to the lack of income to properly support their families."

- Keith Graham, Public Works, City of Newport News



Wage increases that recognize our years of service and experience

"I joined the union because with all my experience in this field and my college degree, I should be making more money. We have to live outside of work. I feel like I had to work a lot of overtime just to maintain my bills. These low wages are stressful because I am limited in what I can do." - Nicole Maple-James, Human Services, City of Virginia Beach



Unions give us a seat at the table, and help improve diversity

"Workers need a union with collective bargaining so we can have a voice on job. With a union we can have a seat at the table with the City and help improve diversity"

- Velma Owens, Public Utilities, City of Norfolk

Virginia Beach Workers Appointed to Collective Bargaining Task Force

After three years of struggle, the City of Virginia Beach is finally moving forward with approving Collective Bargaining!

The SWJC has been working with city workers in Virginia Beach since the August 2020 sanitation workers strike. In that time, thousands of workers have been engaged in learning more about their rights, and how to organize to win improved pay and benefits.

At a City Council meeting in June, a formal vote was taken to establish a Task Force to draw up a draft ordinance to determine how collective bargaining will function.

At a council meeting in August, a vote was taken to appoint 11 members to the task force including two workers that have been working closely with the SWJC - Terry Green, a Utility Crew Leader in the Water Distribution section of Public Utilities and Brad Belton, a Heavy Equipment Operator in Waste Management section of Public Works.

At the first meeting of the Task Force in September 2023, Max Gonano, a firefighter, was elected as chair of the committee, and Brad Belton was elected as Vice Chair.

Workers have been studying city policies and reviewing ordinances from other cities across Virginia in order to draft the strongest, pro-worker language possible in the ordinance. Protections that will come with collective bargaining including stronger job security, better enforcement of policies to protect against racial and gender discrimination, increasing wages, strengthening health and retirement benefits. It is expected that the final ordinance will be adopted in January 2024.



Terry Green, Chair, VB Organizing Committee



Brad Belton, Waste Management

The Saladin Muhammad Organizing Blitz: Building Power of Black municipal workers across NC



On June 26, SWJC and UE hosted summer organizing blitz in honor and remembrance of founding organizer and leader of the Black workers' movement in the South, Saladin Muhammad. The blitz targeted majority-Black workplaces in four cities across the state of North Carolina, with organizers speaking to city workers in Raleigh, Durham, and Greensboro and state workers at Murdoch Developmental Center, a mental health facility in Butner.

Members from four of UE's newly organized graduate worker locals traveled to join the blitz. Graduate workers from the University of Minnesota, Johns Hopkins, Stanford, and Northwestern worked with Local 150 rank-and-file members throughout the week to have conversations with workers about their conditions and the importance of building a strong union.

UE members and community allies in Durham met workers at several facilities throughout the week. The week prior, the Durham City Council released its annual budget, allotting a six to eight percent raise for firefighters and police but only two percent for the vast majority of city workers, including workers in solid waste management, public works, water maintenance, and parks and recreation. Workers were frustrated with this lack of prioritization from the Council; a common refrain during organizing conversations was that picking up trash and maintaining infrastructure were just as essential

as the work of police and firefighters. A connected issue that emerged through conversations was the severe understaffing throughout city facilities. At the end of the week, 15 Durham city workers, including several new members who had just signed their union cards, met to discuss how to rectify this pay inequity and understaffing, launching a petition for a \$5,000 bonus, reduced reliance on temps, and an end to the understaffing.

"Workers left this blitz ready to organize and build their union," said Local 150 President **Sekia Royall** in a video the local made about the blitz. **The Saladin Muhammad Blitz engaged over 2000 workers, resulting in 305 new phone numbers and 67 new members.** Through this engagement, Local 150 was able to grow and reinvigorate their organizing.

Beyond the opportunity to build the union, workers canvassing learned firsthand from the experience of Local 150 members, including longtime UE member Angaza Laughinghouse. Laughinghouse spoke to the workers about the importance and struggles of Black workers in the labor movement historically and the more than 25-year-long history of Local 150, including its beginnings in Black Workers for Justice, an organization of Black workers dedicated to fighting for self-determination and human rights for working-class people.

Virginia Beach Organizing Blitz engages thousands of City workers in campaign to win Collective Bargaining



The SWJC and UE hosted an organizing blitz with a main objective of talking to thousands of city workers. Building their numbers and increasing their membership will assist municipal workers in Virginia Beach in gaining collective bargaining rights. In the words of co-chair **Pat Thebert**, “collective bargaining for the city of Virginia Beach will make a world of difference. It’s going to allow the workers to have a voice that they have not had in 60 years.” Strides towards collective bargaining have already begun, and one massive win is that two union leaders, **Terry Green** (committee chair and water department worker) and **Brad Belton** (waste management worker), have already been appointed to the city task force which will help draft the language for collective bargaining. As important as this achievement is, further organizing effort and collective action are needed to prevent politicians from stalling and to secure the right to collective bargaining.

With assistance from twenty-five community supporters from around the country, organizers had hundreds of conversations and signed up over 70 new workers on union cards. Fellow Virginia workers from UE Local 123 fielded a particularly strong

contingent, but they were not alone in coming to support their colleagues, as four UE graduate workers from Northwestern University and University of Chicago also participated.

Volunteers traveled to several job sites including waste management, public works, public utilities, human services, and parks and recreation. There, they talked about the important work the union is doing in Virginia Beach and encouraged workers to sign a union card. City workers were especially interested in discussing their labor rights, which helped drum up energy on the ground. The conversations were incredibly productive and successful, as reflected in hard numbers: the team talked to over 1,000 workers, and handed out more than 1,000 informational leaflets and brochures,

During the organizing blitz, the SWJC facilitated a political education forum, in which Black Workers for Justice organizer **Ashaki Binta** presented on the “Centrality of Black Workers in Organizing the South.” Her presentation reinforced that the Black working class has been and will continue to be central to both the Black freedom movement and the labor movement.

Rocky Mount Sanitation Workers Advance Fight for REAL Pay Raise!



Pictured above (left) Arnie Jones speaks at rally outside City Hall on October 10. (right) Sanitation workers gather to discuss campaign in late October.

Occupying the front page of the local Rocky Mount Telegram for months, the Rocky Mount sanitation workers have been going to city council demanding a 25% across board raise for all public works employees. In June, Rocky Mount city manager unilaterally gave police department a 35% raise, without consulting city council. Within a week or two, the city manager gave a 27% raise to fire department employees. Rocky Mount Sanitation, Street Maintenance and Parks & Rec workers, who are overwhelmingly Black, all deserve equal treatment. Twice a raise has been presented to city council by councilmen Andre Knight and Reuben Blackwell and twice it has been voted down, once by a vote 4 to 3 and second by a vote 5 to 1. Once again on September 25, Councilman Knight proposed a 15% across board raise for all sanitation workers and a 5% cost of living raise for all city workers who did not receive at least a 5% raise from the pay study. Seven citizens rose to speak eloquently to city council in favor of this pay raise and fair treatment for city workers. These seven speakers included Rev. Dr. Thomas L. Walker who led community support for the historic 1978 Rocky Mount sanitation workers strike.

At a recent NAACP forum for city council elections on August 24, candidates spoke to the question would they support a strike or demonstration by city workers for across the board raise. Four candidates clearly spoke in support of the workers' demands for a fair pay raise: mayoral candidate Theresa Alston Stokes; Ward 1 candidate Andre

Knight; Ward 4 candidate Rev. Everett Silver; and Ward 5 candidate Joshua Robinson. Rocky Mount citizens are urged to vote on October 10 for candidates that support the workers.

On August 28 and again on October 10, SWJC and UE hosted a rally in front of City Hall. **Arnie Jones**, sanitation worker, and other city workers spoke out at the City Council meeting demanding a fair raise.

Jones told the council members present that a lot of promises and guarantees were made during the June 26 council meeting, but that "We can't trust you."

Jones said that he believes the compensation study that came out "didn't help us any."

On Thursday, September 28 nearly 30 city workers and supporters gathered to continue to plan the campaign for higher pay for city workers. The meeting was co-hosted by the SWJC and NAACP and was attended by council men Andre Knight and Reuben Blackwell. Over dozen city workers, mostly from sanitation department were in attendance, along with other UE150 union retired leaders, Richard Petway, Dale Jackson and Jim Wrenn. Two key labor attorneys, Clay Turner and Natalyn Ohree, were also in attendance.

Special guest, Durham city worker, **Willie Brown**, also addressed the meeting, speaking about the recent 6-day stand down of sanitation workers in Durham, fighting for an immediate \$5000 bonus, which passed the following week. Brown emphasized the need for collective organization and action.