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Jobs with Justice Fights for Future

By Stewart Acuff

In June, I attended a hearing at the community center in the tiny town of Versailles, Ky. At this hearing, state legislators, a local leader of the NAACP, a retired University of Kentucky professor and more than 100 leaders and activists heard from 10 workers as they told their stories about efforts by Quebecor World, the world's largest industrial printer, to block their struggle to freely form a union.

Many of these workers talked about why they wanted to form a union in the first place: to win important job safety protections, affordable health care and a say in their working conditions. One-by-one, they proceeded to talk about all the tactics that the company used to prevent workers from having a free and fair choice, like harassing union supporters, holding mandatory one-sided meetings with supervisors against their union, and creating a hostile environment geared towards intimidating workers from exercising their free choice.

This gathering, known as a Workers' Rights Board, is one of countless public meetings that are occurring around the country. They allow the public to hear the struggles of any worker wherever and whenever injustice occurs and take their campaign away from behind the closed doors of their worksite.

The Workers' Rights Board is one of the most effective tactics developed by an organization called Jobs With Justice (JWJ). A board is formed when community leaders and clergy come together to hear from workers whose rights have been violated, to pronounce moral judgments on those violations, to find real ways to support and assist those workers, to offer real solutions and to pressure the employers.

Since its inception, the mission of Jobs With Justice is to improve working people's standard of living, to fight for job security and to protect the freedom of workers to form unions. They have become an indispensable part of the progressive community and an actor towards the common goal of creating a more vibrant and growing labor movement in the USA.

JWJ coalitions have become essential to a labor in the continuing struggle for social and economic justice.

JWJ is both a product of and contributor to the fundamental changes that took place in the American labor movement in the mid to late 1980s, when Ronald Reagan fired the striking air traffic controllers, instigating the assault on workers' rights that continue to this day. Following this event, the political atmosphere rapidly changed against workers' unions -- the right to strike and the freedom to form unions.

Following this incident, a legal industry sprung up to counsel and assist employers to twist, mutilate and violate the National Labor Relations Act. From then on, employers routinely took advantage of the various weaknesses of the National Labor Relations Act to harass, intimidate and even illegally fire workers trying to form a union.

For example, the number of workers awarded back pay because they were illegally discharged or discriminated against for union activity skyrocketed from fewer than 1,000 per year in the 1950s to 20,000 per year by the late 1990s, according to Human Rights Watch, an internationally respected human rights group.

In fact, in 25% of private sector organizing campaigns, a worker is illegally fired for trying to form a union, according to Cornell University's Kate Bronfenbrenner. Furthermore, in 97% of private-sector campaigns where workers form a union, employers fight against their workers' efforts.

Jobs with Justice has been at the forefront at exposing this anti-worker industry through community pressure and actively supports new federal bi-partisan legislation that seeks to fundamentally reform labor law. Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., and Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., introduced the Employee Free Choice Act last November. This legislation would protect workers from many of the grueling obstacles that they currently face when they try to form a union. Already, 240 members of Congress have signed up as co-sponsors.

Long before this recent legislation and before institutional labor admitted it, JWW realized that workers in America had lost the right to organize, the freedom to form unions and to bargain collectively. Jobs With Justice has been on the frontlines of workers' efforts and struggles to form or maintain their unions and to bargain with hostile employers. That pressure on employers and support for workers had come in the form of plant gate rallies, community delegation visits, corporate headquarters takeovers, politician accountability sessions, pay-ins, sit-ins, and marches.

In addition to leading the fight to restore this fundamental human right to America's workers, one of Jobs With Justice's most important roles is to be an essential link to and advocate inside labor for the broader movement for global justice against the worldwide corporate-fueled economic race to the bottom.

Two examples illustrate this important involvement: In November of 1999, at the World Trade Organization demonstrations in Seattle, we discovered the potential power of the global justice movement by bringing together a cross-section of national unions, non-governmental organizations, environmental groups, civil, women, and human rights organizations, and other activists. Secondly, following this historic action, in April of 2000 in Washington, D.C., JWW joined with the Steelworkers to lead the AFL-CIO and other national unions in the massive demonstration against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. They continue to lead the way in the global justice movement ever since.

Both at home and abroad, JWW confronts global corporate greed and ensures that the American labor movement stays in this critical struggle for worldwide workers' rights and stands against a global system of exploitation, oppression, and economic brutality that threatens our jobs, our way of life and, indeed, our humanity.

Jobs With Justice uses its coalition-building skills and extensive experience to bring together the labor movement and its natural allies into the global justice movement, such as 50 Years Is Enough and United Students Against Sweatshops, among others.

JWW understands one thing about coalitions that institutional labor needs to remember: Long-term coalitions require reciprocity. Jobs With Justice is where labor and community leaders come together as partners, and local JWW struggles involve not only union workers, but also include community and workers' struggles outside the labor movement, such as: to save healthcare and prescription drugs for the poor in Atlanta, to organizing worker centers for immigrants in New York, to win the most basic rights for day laborers in Chicago, and numerous others.

JWW knows that the ultimate power of labor lies within workers in motion, mobilized to fight for justice, and that mobilizing workers requires organizations where workers have a concrete investment, where not only are their voices heard -- they must be welcomed and regarded with importance. Jobs with Justice serves to always remind us of that important fact.

The stakes have never been greater for working people in this country, and Jobs with Justice is a formidable power towards bringing like-minded individuals and groups together as we build to create an environment that fosters organizing, community action, and global economic justice.

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