



Institute for  
Policy Studies

**BLACK WORKER INITIATIVE**

# **#Black Workers Matter**

## **Organize the South**

**SEPTEMBER 14-15, 2015**

**Pullen Memorial Baptist Church**

**Raleigh, North Carolina**

# **CONFERENCE REPORT**

# #BlackWorkersMatter



As Washington’s first progressive multi-issue think tank, the **Institute for Policy Studies (IPS)** has served as a policy and research resource for visionary social justice movements for over four decades—from the anti-war and civil rights movements in the 1960s to the peace and global justice movements of the last decade. Some of the greatest progressive minds of the 20th and 21st centuries have found a home at IPS, starting with the organization’s founders, Richard Barnet and Marcus Raskin. IPS scholars have included such luminaries as Arthur Waskow, Gar Alperovitz, Saul Landau, Bob Moses, Rita Mae Brown, Barbara Ehrenreich, Roger Wilkins, and Orlando Letelier. Today the Institute’s work is organized into more than a dozen projects, reflecting our public scholars’ diverse areas of expertise.

**The Black Worker Initiative** is a bold and exciting new effort launched by the Institute for Policy Studies, which is deeply committed to helping achieve both the historic and contemporary aims of the labor and civil rights movements. Black workers have been particularly hard hit by the rising tide of inequality in today’s economy. We hope our Initiative will be a part of the solution to helping expand opportunities for black worker organizing and thereby greatly aid the revitalization of the U.S. labor movement as a whole. Indeed, the Initiative operates under the belief that black workers hold a key role in union revitalization. Without a platform for their voices and perspectives, a vital piece of the progressive movement is absent from the greater public discourse on race and economic and social justice. The Initiative seeks to be a forum for these important conversations, allowing relationships, ideas, and projects to develop. The Initiative will use conferences, published reports, public education materials, and mainstream and social media in framing a road map to how black worker organizing can be an ongoing vehicle for the preservation of the labor movement and the promotion of civil rights and racial and economic justice.

# #BlackWorkersMatter

# Organize the South

On September 14 and 15, 2015, the Black Worker Initiative of the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) held a two-day convening on race and organizing at the historic Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, which has a decades-long tradition of progressive stands on social issues. The **Black Workers Matter: Organize the South** convening focused on fresh, new strategies for supporting organizing as a means of lifting up black workers in this region, known for its high levels of poverty, low wages, and low unionization rates.

The Black Worker Initiative is deeply committed to helping achieve both the historic and contemporary aims of the labor and civil rights movements. We hope our work will contribute to the expansion of opportunities for black worker organizing and thereby greatly aid the revitalization of the U.S. labor movement as a whole. The Initiative operates under the belief that black workers hold a key role in union revitalization. Without a platform for their voices and perspectives, a vital piece of the progressive movement is absent from the greater public discourse on race and economic and social justice.

This convening is a continuation of the groundbreaking conversations and work of Black Worker Initiative director, [Marc Bayard](#), who has consistently advocated for a [racial justice lens to be applied to all conversations on worker organizing](#). Representatives from several national labor unions (United Auto Workers; United Steelworkers; American Federation of Government Employees; United Mine Workers of America; Service Employees International Union; Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees and Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union; Communications Workers of America; United Food and Commercial Workers; and the AFL-CIO) along with labor support and constituency organizations such as the A. Philip Randolph Institute, Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, Black Workers for Justice, and Working America were in attendance. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leadership from North Carolina, Tennessee, Mississippi, and South Carolina joined these labor organizations. In addition, **civil rights, religious, worker rights, and Black Lives Matter activists and international guests were present for this critical forum. Finally, key labor academics, as well as foundation staff, were also in attendance.**

The two-day convening featured five interactive panels that drew on the perspectives of organizers, activists, community leaders, and scholars. Black Workers Matter also featured keynote speakers Rev. Dr. William Barber, President of the North Carolina National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); Cecil Roberts, United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) President; and Robert Korstad, Professor of Public Policy and History at Duke University.

# Conference Highlights

## The Context for Our Work

As we helped to argue in the pioneering report [#BlackWorkersMatter](#), history teaches us that organizing is the only way for black workers to challenge the structural racism that maintains and perpetuates black social, political, and economic inequity. To make black economic equity a real possibility in the twenty-first century—and not only a dream—black workers must build enough political and institutional power to challenge inequality, change policies, and transform the country. Black communities themselves must have the resources and capacity to build the power to determine what economic development looks like in their communities and who will benefit. But the urgent organizing needed to address this crisis will not happen if black worker organizations around the country continue to receive such limited financial investments.

Black workers have been particularly harmed by the decline of organized labor, which has been critical to the creation of family-supporting jobs—especially in manufacturing and the public sector. The Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR), for example, documented that 15.7 percent of all black workers were union members or covered by a union contract at their workplace in 2008. Twenty-five years prior, that share was 31.7 percent. As a result of this and the rising tide of inequality, poverty levels, wages, and educational attainment are some of the worst in the nation. This is especially true for the South where over half of the nation's black population lives. But, despite this, the potential for black workers to help rejuvenate the labor movement and transform it into the ultimate working-class and civil rights vehicle is enormous.

The South offers a bold opportunity to make a stand. Strategic alliances can be reborn and re-forged, allowing race to be the bridge that is crossed together. [Many are already taking notice, including those in the media and other key institutions.](#) Revitalization of the labor movement is a possibility, and black workers are potentially a major key. The following sections highlight key discussions and calls to action that happened during the convening from a variety of different groups and perspectives. They collectively help to form a road map for organizing and building power in the future.

## Why Black Worker Organizing Matters in the South and What We Need to Do

***Opening Address by Rev. Dr. William Barber, President of the North Carolina National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)***

Reverend Barber provided the historical and moral argument for, as well as an explanation of the value of, black worker organizing in the Deep South, declaring that we are now bearing witness to the “Third Reconstruction.” The First Reconstruction (circa 1868) was a political convergence of poor whites and recently emancipated blacks. The Second Reconstruction was the civil rights movement of the 1960s, when the labor movement made some efforts but never fully maximized the potential to build power in coalition with civil rights organizing. The Third Reconstruction Barber spoke of is now, and we need to look to history to address some of the current challenges of worker organizing.

Barber argued that white workers need to be definitively in coalition with black workers in support of unionization. If you know labor unions are responsible for legislation granting workers a 40-hour work week and retirement benefits—what would cause you to vote against a body of people that have a record of raising your standard of living? What would cause some white workers to fight against labor rights when 20 percent of North Carolina children are in poverty? Why is Medicaid expansion the new civil war? What would cause some people to cut the heart out of public education? Barber stressed that race plays a major factor in all these issues, and, if labor does not address racial bias and build coalitions to confront it, then victory in the South will always be elusive. Listen to the entirety of Barber’s fiery speech [here](#).

### **Panel: Fighting for \$15 in the South While Black: What Are We Worth?**

***Moderated by Rosalyn Pelles, Former Director of the Civil, Human and Women’s Rights Department, American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO); Advisor, Forward Together Moral Monday Movement***

- Benjamin Wilkins, Southeast Coordinator for the Fight for \$15, Service Employees International Union (SEIU)
- Reverend Nelson Johnson, Pastor of Faith Community Church and Executive Director of The Beloved Community Center, Greensboro, North Carolina
- Abdul-Jalil Rasheed-Burnett, Worker and Fight for \$15 Activist, Durham, North Carolina

The Fight for \$15 movement, which started in 2012, has swept across the nation. Its impact has been strong, but its limited analysis on race has come into question. In the South, the Fight for \$15 is now seen as a campaign that can authentically lift up low-wage and struggling black

workers. It is very hard to separate race from class on this issue, and that has been the strength of the movement.

More than half of African American workers in the U.S. make less than \$15 an hour, according to the National Employment Law Project (NELP). These low-wage service sector jobs blacks find themselves in contribute to cycles of economic distress with widespread social consequences. But, as we learned from workers at the convening, the Fight for \$15 movement is helping workers achieve personal and structural gains in the workplace. Abdul-Jalil Rasheed-Burnett, a fast-food worker in Durham, North Carolina, shared with the audience how he has been able to connect to the Fight for \$15 and develop organizing strategies to fight for better personal conditions in the workplace. As Rasheed-Burnett recalls, when he first heard of the Fight for \$15, he thought \$15 was something that could never be possible. But wins across the nation, and the strategies he is learning for bettering his workplace environment, prove to him that the movement will be successful. He shared with the audience that he learned ways to argue for personal wage increases and saw a slight raise in his income, which had not happened in the previous eight years. His sentiments were shared by the others on the panel who stressed how the black church and other black-led organizations on the ground in North Carolina see the \$15 fight as part of a new civil rights movement and workers like Rasheed-Burnett worth fighting for.

For more on the Fight for \$15 and the need for a deeper racial analysis to organize and win, see this piece by Marc Bayard in [Ebony](#) magazine.

## **Panel: Auto Transplants Organizing in the South: How Do We Make This a Civil Rights Fight?**

***Moderated by Marc D. Bayard, Associate Fellow and Director of the Black Worker Initiative, Institute for Policy Studies***

- Mark Haasis, Director of Organizing, International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW)
- Frank Figgers, Strategy Consultant for the Mississippi National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
- Dr. Soren Niemann-Findeisen, Trade Union Officer International Department, IG Metall (German Metalworkers Union)
- Mitchell Smith, Assistant Director of Transnational, International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW)

The stark infiltration of auto industry transplants into the Deep South has not gone unnoticed. This manufacturing trend in the region has impacted many African American communities. Why these companies have come to the South and whether black workers will be able to both get these jobs and command respect and dignity at their workplace are open questions. This

panel heavily focused on solutions as to how these transplants can be organized and how worker rights, as well as civil rights, can be enshrined into all future union organizing efforts.

Key staff from the United Auto Workers (UAW), as well as Dr. Niemann-Findeisen from IG Metall, the German Metal Workers Union, enlightened the audience as to how rights of workers in the automobile industry in the U.S. compare to their counterparts in Germany. According to Dr. Niemann-Findeisen, the workforce and workplace condition standards in the South are “ripe for exploitation.” For example, inflation-adjusted wages for motor vehicle parts manufacturing fell by 14 percent between 2003 and 2013. Currently, the auto sector is the largest manufacturing industry in the United States. But this employment growth can be hurtful to local economies because factories strategically position themselves all over the South where they can hire from the most vulnerable labor force. So, despite the resulting high employment rates, the workers in this industry are often underpaid and exploited which hurts these vulnerable local economies.

The Germans left the meeting understanding that race plays a critical role in much of U.S. economic and social policy and that any successful union organizing must take this into account. Allies in the room learned that the German works councils, co-determination, and apprenticeship models offer up new ways for black workers to think about organizing and demanding their rights on a global scale. Holding corporations accountable for treating workers with the same standards at home and abroad is an ideal we should all strive towards.

## **Panel: Black Workers Organizing with a Gender Frame: New Models, New Methods, New Successes in the South**

***Moderated by Kimberly Freeman Brown, Author, And Still I Rise: Black Women Labor Leaders' Voices, Power and Promise***

- Carol Blackmon, Senior Consultant, Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative (SRBWI)
- Celeste Faison, Black Organizing Coordinator, National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA)
- Colette Tippy, Lead Organizer for Stand with Dignity, New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice (NOWCRJ)

*“Black women [are] sitting at the nexus of almost every social ill that exists in our country, particularly economically. If black women and their economic well-being aren't at the center of our strategy, you're not serious about economic justice. It has to be the litmus test by which we not only measure how well our economy is doing, but how well our work on economic justice is going.”*

—Kimberly Freeman Brown

On the second day of the convening, a dynamic panel engaged in a deep discussion of the issue of intersectionality. Black women organizers are some of the boldest and bravest activists in the labor movement, yet they are too often under-supported and at times ignored. Organizers representing Atlanta and New Orleans, as well as Carol Blackmon from the Southern Rural Black Workers Initiative (SRBWI), joined in this lively debate.

Members of the panel recognized black women organizers and workers have different experiences than their male or white counterparts. According to a report by SRBWI, “the loss of major industries and jobs in the rural South has had a direct impact on employment opportunities and the long-term economic security of women. The unemployment rates of the counties studied are more than double that of the state level and nearly triple the national rate. For black women in rural counties surveyed, the unemployment rate was 23.6 percent, a rate four times higher than that of white women in the same counties, at 5.9 percent.” However, as noted by Celeste Faison from the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), black women are also the demographic most likely to join a union. And Colette Tippy from the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice (NOWCRJ) described women workers as being more creative labor leaders, as they are more likely to demand better workplace conditions that do not depend only on wages. All three panelists spoke about the interconnectedness of poverty issues. Poor infrastructure makes it harder to travel to work. Poor work conditions lead to poor health conditions, and poor health conditions make it harder to work.

Faison also reminded us that domestic workers were key in the Montgomery bus boycotts of the 1950s because black women domestic workers used the buses to travel into town to work for white families. Still today, black women workers are critical to the upbringing and well-being of many people throughout the South. Because of this interconnectedness, civil rights struggles and workplace struggles can have resounding effects on other symptoms of poverty. To learn more about black women leaders in the labor movement, see the [And Still I Rise](#) report by the Institute for Policy Studies.

# Conclusion

*“Our focus now needs to be on young people looking to spread their wings... The NAACP can’t do it alone, your local [union] can’t do it alone, we need affiliates, we need young people, we need churches, we need creativity, we need you. Racism hurts us all and it hurts our movement.”*

—J. David Cox, National President, American Federation of Government Employees

These highlights from the convening illustrate a pathway to a different organizing model in the South. Black workers want to be in the lead in this model. These discussions helped many in the room realize, and for others served as further validation of, the principle that traditional labor organizing strategies will not work for black workers in the South. Instead, coalitions must be built among unions, black worker economic justice groups, and the faith community.

This was a strategic convening of different leaders from diverse groups, and the conference was a mechanism of connecting them. What in the end came out was the realization that a new model is needed that involves long-term commitment to black communities and workers. Campaigns need to be multi-issue, and the organizing model must have a racial justice lens directly incorporated into its fabric from the beginning to be successful.

Specifically, calls were made to develop black-led organizing drives in North Carolina, Tennessee, Mississippi, and South Carolina. These drives should be multi-union and work in coordination with labor support organizations and civil rights groups who have grounding and standing in the black community. Early pilot campaigns should focus on a broad set of worker needs and not simply traditional “bread and butter” union issues. Gender should play a key role in any work done in the South, and campaign staff, resources, and strategies should reflect this. The activists in the room want the broader labor and foundation community to know they are ready to push for this change and that allies and financial support are needed to drive this work. Many of the clear recommendations from the [#BlackWorkersMatter](#) report were echoed in the room, and those there were ready to move directly from theory to practice in this important work at this critical time.

The Black Worker Initiative will continue to have discussions with key organizations from the convening to both develop and present in the near future alternative models of collective action for black workers that can be supported in the future by allies and funders alike.

# AGENDA

## Monday, September 14, 2015

### 9 am **Welcome/Opening Statements**

- Marc D. Bayard, Associate Fellow and Director of the Black Worker Initiative, Institute for Policy Studies
- MaryBe McMillan, Secretary-Treasurer, North Carolina State American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)
- Rosalyn Pelles, Former Director of the Civil, Human and Women's Rights Department American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO); Advisor, Forward Together Moral Monday Movement
- Nancy E. Petty, Pastor, Pullen Memorial Baptist Church

### 9:30 am **Why Black Worker Organizing Matters in the South and What We Need to Do**

*Opening Address by Rev. Dr. William Barber, President of the North Carolina National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)*

### 10 am **Panel: Cutting Edge Research on Southern Organizing Opportunities**

*Moderated by Marc D. Bayard, Associate Fellow and Director of the Black Worker Initiative, Institute for Policy Studies*

- Chris Kromm, Executive Director, Institute for Southern Studies; Publisher, *Facing South* and *Southern Exposure*
- Nik Theodore, Professor of Urban Planning and Policy, University of Illinois

### 11:15 am **Break**

### 11:30 am **Panel: Fighting for \$15 in the South While Black: What are We Worth?**

*Moderated by Rosalyn Pelles, Former Director of the Civil, Human and Women's Rights Department American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO); Advisor, Forward Together Moral Monday Movement*

- Benjamin Wilkins, Southeast Coordinator for the Fight for \$15, Service Employees International Union (SEIU)
- Reverend Nelson Johnson, Pastor of Faith Community Church and Executive Director of The Beloved Community Center, Greensboro, North Carolina
- Abdul-Jalil Rasheed-Burnett, Worker and Fight for \$15 Activist, Durham, North Carolina

**1 pm**      **Keynote Lunch Speaker**

- Cecil E. Roberts, President, United Mine Workers of America (UMWA)

**2 pm**      **Panel: Auto Transplants Organizing in the South:  
How Do We Make This a Civil Rights Fight?**

*Moderated by Marc D. Bayard, Associate Fellow and Director of the Black Worker Initiative,  
Institute for Policy Studies*

- Mark Haasis, Director of Organizing, International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW)
- Frank Figgers, Strategy Consultant for the Mississippi National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
- Dr. Soren Niemann-Findeisen, Trade Union Officer International Department, IG Metall (German Metalworkers Union)
- Mitchell Smith, Assistant Director of Transnational, International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW)

**4 pm**      **Closing Remarks**

**6 pm**      **Cocktail Hour** at the Doubletree Hotel

**Performances by**

Petrina Bryant (Trina Thoughtz), Spoken Word Artist

Yara Allen, Cultural Artist

# Tuesday, September 15, 2015

**9 am Panel: Black Workers Organizing with a Gender Frame:  
New Models, New Methods, New Successes in the South**

*Moderated by Kimberly Freeman Brown, Author, And Still I Rise: Black Women Labor Leaders' Voices, Power and Promise*

- Carol Blackmon, Senior Consultant, Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative (SRBWI)
- Celeste Faison, Black Organizing Coordinator, National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA)
- Colette Tippy, Lead Organizer for Stand with Dignity, New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice (NOWCRJ)

**10:15 am Break**

**10:30 am Panel: Union Campaigns Facing Race Head-On: A New Solidarity**

*Moderated by Tefere Gebre, Executive Vice President, American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)*

- Mike Hill, Research Coordinator, Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees and Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (UNITE HERE) Local 355
- Milton L. Jones, International Vice President, Director, United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) Region 5-Southern
- Mable McIntosh, Worker Activist, United Steel, Paper and Forestry, Rubber, Manufacturing, Energy, Allied Industrial and Service Workers International Union (USW) Local 9-950
- Brooks Sunkitt, Vice President Public, Healthcare and Education Workers Sector, Communications Workers of America (CWA)

**12 pm Keynote Speaker  
What Southern Organizing Can Teach Us About Why Black Workers Matter**

- Robert Korstad, Professor of Public Policy and History, Duke University

**1 pm Lunch**

2 pm

**Community and Labor Partnerships: Where Do We Go From Here?**

*Moderated by Marc D. Bayard, Associate Fellow and Director of the Black Worker Initiative, Institute for Policy Studies*

- Clayola Brown, President, A. Philip Randolph Institute (APRI)
- J. David COX, National President, American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE)
- Gloria Jean Sweet-Love, President, Tennessee National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

***“The two most dynamic and cohesive liberal forces in the country are the labor movement and the Negro freedom movement. Together we can be architects of democracy.”***

**—MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.**

**AFL-CIO National Convention, Miami Beach, Florida**

**December 11, 1961**

# #Black Workers Matter

## Organize the South

*With additional support from*



[www.ips-dc.org/projects/black-workers-initiative/](http://www.ips-dc.org/projects/black-workers-initiative/)

For more information, contact Marc D. Bayard, Associate Fellow, Director, Black Worker Initiative, Institute for Policy Studies at [mbayard@ips-dc.org](mailto:mbayard@ips-dc.org)