BLACK WORKERS TAKE THE LEAD: THE SOUTHERN FREEDOM MOVEMENT AND THE BUILDING OF BLACK WORKERS FOR JUSTICE, 1981-1988

By

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ABSTRACT

Through the use of organizational records, newspapers, oral history interviews, and other primary and secondary sources, this dissertation examines Black Workers for Justice's history from 1981-1988. I explore the organization's founding, key leaders, its vision for social transformation, and its commitment to building independent political structures to strengthen the workers and Black freedom movements. As scholarship on the 1980s continues to develop, I argue that the history of Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ) is an important window into the African American freedom struggle of that time. BWFJ's history belongs to a larger story about the world and movement in which they organized. That is, BWFJ did not have a narrow conception of freedom and how to achieve it. Ultimately, this dissertation on BWFJ argues that the organizing and political program of BWFJ demonstrates the centrality of the South and North Carolina in the African American freedom struggle.

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The completion of my dissertation would not have been possible without the support of family, friends, comrades, and mentors. Indeed, writing a dissertation requires individual rigor, discipline, and patience. At the same time, dissertation writing also requires a supportive community. Prior to and during my time at Michigan State University, my family has been the foundation of my support system. I owe so much of who I am as a student, writer, thinker, scholar, and human being to my parents, Kemba Dillahunt-Hopkins and Lawrence Holloway, Jr; my grandparents, Ajamu and Rukiya Dillahunt (maternal) and Lawrence Holloway, Sr and Melinda Ann Holloway (paternal); my sister, Imani Dillahunt-Holloway; my cousin, Ashanti McMillian; and my aunts Dara Charpentier, Brookie Holloway, and Safiya Robinson.

Beyond being supportive and helping shape who I am, my family is a central part of my dissertation topic. That is, Black Workers for Justice raised me and has been part of my life since I was born. My roots in the organization run deep. BWFJ raised my mother, aunts, cousins, and sister. Growing up, my sister, cousin, and I would attend BWFJ meetings, events, rallies, and a range of other activities. By the time I got to high school and committed myself to the task of making the world a better place, BWFJ was the organization that brought me political clarity and hope. As a young man coming of age, I noticed and appreciated the wisdom of its leaders. They were detailed and had a clear vision for the world and the origins of the problems impacting Black people. As a high school student, I remember reading BWFJ literature in my grandparents' basement.

Despite being raised in the organization and deeply connected to it, I didn't always recognize its historical significance. As an undergraduate student in the Department of History at North Carolina Central University (NCCU) that changed. In several of my undergraduate

courses, I did my final projects on Black Workers for Justice. During my sophomore year in Dr. Baiyina Muhammad's Black Women and Activism class, I did an oral history interview with my grandmother, Rukiya Dillahunt, who has been a member of BWFJ since the 1980s and served as the Director of its Women's Commission. With the guidance of Dr. Muhammad, I started to see the importance of BWFJ to the historiography. A few semesters later, I did my final paper and presentation for Dr. Charles Johnson's United States History class on BWFJ where I situated BWFJ's founding as part of a larger Black worker tradition. I can say with confidence that if it were not for NCCU's History Department, this dissertation would not have been possible. A huge thank you goes to the Department for not only helping me determine and start researching my dissertation topic, but for also providing me with a rigorous, detailed, and supportive training in the African American historical tradition. As a student in the Department of History I had the opportunity to take classes like: The Haitian Revolution, Black Feminist Thought, Black Women and Activism, The History of Pan-Africanism, the African Presence in Europe, and Public History and the African Diaspora. All of these courses and the professors in the history department aided my understanding of the world and BWFJ's role in it. Thank you to Dr. Jim Harper (chair), Dr. Tony Frazier, Dr. Baiyina Muhammad, Dr. Charles Johnson, Dr. Jarvis Hargrove, Dr. Joshua Nadel, Dr. Lydia Lindsey, Dr. Jerry Gershenhorn, Dr. Freddie Parker, Dr. Carlton Wilson, and Dr. TaKeia Anthony.

While an undergraduate student at NCCU I also majored in political science and owe the Department of Political Science a big thank you for the role it played in not only my understanding of the world, but also what it means to be a scholar activist. Through the Department, I had a chance to take classes on: Black Politics in America, Democracy and Social Justice, Black Lives Matter, and so many other informative courses. Dr. Jarvis Hall was a major

mentor for me in undergrad. Not only did Dr. Hall introduced us to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and encouraged us to be civically engaged, but he led by example. When there were attacks on public education, I would see Dr. Hall there protesting. When there were attacks on voting rights, I would see Dr. Hall protesting. When there was any threat to democracy, or a social justice course, Dr. Hall was there. We spent four years working together to keep NCCU's social justice tradition alive. Thanks must be extended to the entire political science department: Dr. Emmanuel O. Oritsejafor, Dr. Artemisia F. Stanberry, Dr. Yaba Blay, Dr. Allan Cooper, and Dr. Bruce Lapenson.

With Dr. Hall engraving the importance of SNCC into my peers and I since freshman year, I had a deep curiosity and interest in the organization and its contemporary significance. In 2017, as a young activist eager to learn from SNCC, I was fortunate enough to be connected to the SNCC Digital Gateway Project (SDG) at Duke University. A few months after being connected to the SDG, I was asked to be an intern. My internship and ongoing relationship with the SDG has had a profound impact on me. I not only got an opportunity to understand SNCC from SNCC veterans themselves, but the project also grounded me in the process of telling Black organizational history, the craft of oral history, and using history in service of the present. When I started researching BWFJ, the skills and methodological insights that I learned from the SDG, guided my approach to writing and preserving BWFJ's history. I am grateful and owe so much to Dr. Wesely Hogan, Charlie Cobb, Danita Mason-Hogan, Judy Richardson, Courtland Cox, Jennifer Lawson, Dr. Geri Augusto, Dr. Karlyn Foner, Kaley Deal, Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, Dr. Emily Krosby, Dr. Tim Tyson, Dr. William Chafe, and Kenneth Campbell.

For graduate school, Michigan State University was the perfect doctoral program for me. Through course work and mentorship, I was able to better understand BWFJ and the tradition

they were part of. I also received rigorous historical training and unmatched mentorship. My advisor Dr. Pero Dagbovie is one of the best in the game. His support, wisdom, guidance, and commitment to his craft helped me not only grow as a student but as a human being. It is widely agreed that the best form of mentorship is leading by example. Dr. Dagbovie led by example and so much more. When it is my time to help train the next generation of historians, I will strive to be as principled, caring and rigorous as him. In addition to Dr. Dagbovie, my three other guidance committee members played an important mentorship role in my life. Dr. LaShawn Harris, as a labor historian and scholar of the Black experience has also provided important mentorship and scholarly advice. She has pushed me to think about BWFJ, the 1980s, and Black Women's History in new and profound ways. Dr. Glenn Chambers and Dr. Nwando Achebe also played an important mentorship role during my time at MSU. To my entire guidance committee, thank you. You all made MSU feel like home and I am forever grateful for you all. Beyond my committee, other professors in the history department (and other departments) have supported me and provided guidance. Thank you, Dr. Darlene Clark Hine, Dr. Marshanda Smith, Dr. Aminda (Mindy) Smith, Dr. Michael Stamm, Dr. Helen Veit, Dr. Jamie Monson, Dr. Karrin Hanshew, Dr. Lisa Fine, Dr. Ethan Segal, Dr. Ronen Steinburg, Dr. Yomaira Figueroa, and so many others. I also want to thank the graduate students who welcomed me to MSU's campus and helped me navigate graduate school and the historical profession, Drs James Blackwell, Eddie Bonilla, Chris Shell, Jasmine Howard, Alyssa Lopez, and Shelby Pumphrey. I also want to thank current graduate students Gloria Ashaolu, Jada Gannaway, Nomzamo Ntombela for ongoing support and friendship. I owe a big thanks to East Carolina University and the opportunity to be an Interinstitutional Scholar for Diversity and Inclusion. Being able to teach a course and get ahead on my research helped me get over the finish line. A special thank you to the History

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACPRC— Amilcar Cabral/Paul Robeson Collective

AFSCME— American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Union

AFL-CIO— American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations

ANC— African National Congress

APP— African Peoples Party

APRI— A. Philip Randolph Institute

APWU— American Postal Workers Union

BWFJ— Black Workers for Justice

BUF— Black United Front

CASPC— Committee Against the Schlage Lock Plant Closing

CLU— Central Labor Unions

CPCF— Concerned Black Citizens of Fremont

CPUSA— Communist Party of the United States of America

CP&L— Carolina Power and Light Company

DCCC— Duplin County Concern Citizens

EEOC— Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

FLSC— Fair Labor Support Committee

FOL— Fruit of Labor

HHIA— Hamilton Houses Improvement Association

IAM— International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers

ISS— Institute for Southern Studies

IWWD— International Working Women's Day

MCLC— Martin County Labor Committee (MCLC)

NLRA— National Labor Relations Act

OC— Organizing Committee

RAM— Revolutionary Action Movement

RBUF— Raleigh Black United Front

RCEJD— Raleigh Coalition to End Job Discrimination

RMUP— Rocky Mount Undergarment Plant

SCLC— Southern Christian Leadership Conference

SNCC— Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

SOR— State of the Organization Report

TUC— Trade Union Commission

WC— Women's Commission

WRAC— Workers Right and Action Committee

INTRODUCTION

Through his words and actions, Abner Berry has continually tried to instill his 64 years of history in the Black Liberation Movement to all of our campaigns and struggles. As a Black working class leader and fighter, he has given the best of his experience to the direction and determination of the Black Workers For Justice.[1]

Black Workers for Justice

Many years later, the Black Workers for Justice, centered in Rocky Mount, N.C., came on the scene, adopting many of our [the National Negro Labor Council's] guiding principles. Under harsh conditions they are doing monumental work. The old-timers in the NNLC consider them our successors."[2]

Vicki Garvin, 1996

On February 16, 2019, members of Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ) met in the Department of History at North Carolina Central University (NCCU). At this meeting, BWFJ activists discussed the organization's history and contributions to the labor movement and the Black freedom struggle. Despite having just celebrated thirty-eight years of active participation in North Carolina's struggle for workers' rights and African American self-determination, this was the first time that BWFJ engaged in a comprehensive and collective discussion about its past. Gathered during Black History Month, BWFJ members from Rocky Mount, Wilson, and Raleigh greeted each other with excitement and an eagerness to participate in a long overdue conversation. After settling in and sharing a few jokes, Kenneth Campbell of Free Southern Media and I began the first of many group oral history interviews about BWFJ's founding, early campaigns, workplace struggles, internationalism, and its approach to southern and rural organizing. Although BWFJ had been around for over three decades, Saladin Muhammad, one of BWFJ's main leaders, acknowledged that "one of our weaknesses...and this why I think this project is so very very important is because we never really summed our work up… We may

[1] "Profile of a LifeLong Freedom Fighter: Abner Winston Berry," *Justice Speaks*, February, 1986, 7.

[2] Vicki Garvin, "African American Women Leaders in the Struggle for Social Justice" (speech, University of the District of Columbia, Washington, February 14, 1996).

have summed up a campaign, or this and that but our work as an organization and what we did [has not been adequately summed up]."[3]

Figure 1: BWFJ Activist at the First Group Oral History Interview. From left to right: Leander Tate, Nathanette Mayo, Ajamu Dillahunt (the author's grandfather), Rukiya Dillahunt, Saladin Muhammad, Shafeah M'Balia, Jim Grant, and Angaza Laughinghouse.

Founded in 1981, Black Workers for Justice, organized workers in various workplaces and in different industries throughout North Carolina. They organized and built workplace committees among textile workers, auto workers, restaurant workers, blind workers, and public sector workers. BWFJ not only encouraged workers to be leaders in their workplace, but they also encouraged workers to be leaders outside of the workplace and fight racism and exploitation in the community. BWFJ and its members were active in the struggle for voting rights and Black political power, the struggle for environmental justice, the struggle against US imperialism, and

[3] Saladin Muhammad, "Black Workers for Justice Group Oral History Interview," February 16, 2019, interviewed by Ajamu Dillahunt, recording in possession of the author, East Lansing, MI.

the struggle against women's oppression. In its forty-year history, what made BWFJ an important organization is that they did not want to speak for workers, their organizational philosophy was to empower workers to speak for themselves. Black Workers for Justice built institutions and developed organizational programs that increased workers ability to organize on the job. They published a newspaper called *Justice Speaks*, built worker centers and bookstores, ran workers for political office, and helped build health clinics in Eastern North Carolina. BWFJ held worker's schools and theorized about the issues confronting the Black working class. Throughout its history, BWFJ was achieving major victories as it related to the fight for workers' power in the US South.

The organization had been so committed to the struggle for social transformation for over four decades that making time to document and reflect on its history was almost impossible. But with retirement and older age, the inaugural oral history interview at NCCU changed that. During the interview, BWFJ members revealed underacknowledged and overlooked information about the auspicious and didactic advisership they received during its formative years (1981-1983). While reflecting on BWFJ's founding in 1982, Muhammad, with his Philadelphia-inspired "jeff" cap and freshly groomed beard, shared stories about the guidance and mentorship of long-time activist Abner W. Berry. Muhammad remembered a meeting in Rocky Mount, North Carolina when Berry passionately told his younger comrades in the BWFJ, "through y'all I can see far far down the road." Berry's excitement for BWFJ and its potential impact on the Southern freedom struggle was not something members of the newly formed organization took for granted. Berry's confidence and endorsement was of the highest honor and came from a place of experience and proven leadership in times of crisis and revolutionary possibility. In other words, by the time Berry came to Rocky Mount in 1981 he was a seasoned veteran of the Black

freedom struggle. Six decades earlier, he joined the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) in 1929 and was active in it for twenty-seven years. During his tenure in the Party, Berry was appointed to the Central Committee and organized members of the Black working class in Houston, Texas, Kansas City, Missouri and Harlem, New York. [4]

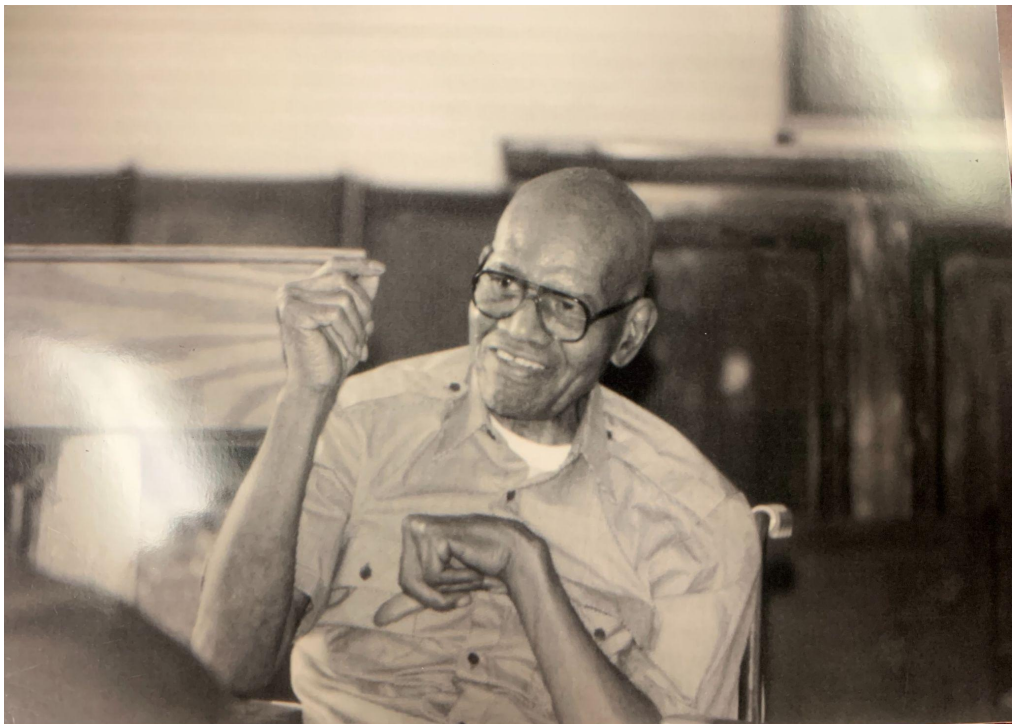

Figure 2: Abner Berry at a Church in Rocky Mount in the 1980s. In the late 1970s, Berry suffered a stroke that paralyzed the left side of his body. Source: Fruit of Labor World Cultural Center.

Along with his personal experiences, Berry brought to Rocky Mount his network of other former and well-experienced Black CPUSA leaders. In 1982, at the National Black Workers

[4] Berry's involvement and leadership in the Communist Party from 1929-57 and his appointment to the Central Committee in 1934 is important to understand because at that time "social democracy and forms of socialism were considered legitimate alternatives to capitalism" and the CPUSA was considered a legitimate political force in the United States. For context on the CPUSA when Berry was part of it, see Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communist During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), xix; Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-36* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1998); Mark Naison, *Communist in Harlem During the Depression* (Champagne, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago, IL: Liberator Press, 1978); Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *To Ask for an Equal Chance: African Americans in the Great Depression* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, Inc., 2009); James Wrenn, *The Making of a Black Prairie Communist: The Narrative of Abner Berry* (Rocky Mount, NC: Unpublished, 1983).

Organizing Committee meeting in New York, Harry Haywood, one of Berry's close comrades during his time in the Party, approached Saladin Muhammad and said, "Comrade, let me talk to you. You sound like a nationalist, and you sound like a communist." Muhammad responded "I guess I am both of those, I'm a revolutionary nationalist. Abner Berry is my mentor." Haywood perked up and said "Berry?!?! Berry is a nationalist?"[5] As a result of this brief exchange with Haywood, Muhammad invited him to Rocky Mount to surprise his old comrade.

When Haywood knocked on the door and walked into Berry's room at the Rocky Mount Wilson Senior's Apartments, the two sage men passionately greeted each other and immediately began to discuss the conditions of Black workers and the path forward for the working class. Although Haywood did not want the conversation to be recorded, the exchange between the two communists remained at the forefront of Muhammad's memory decades later. Muhammad recalled that during their conversation, Haywood asked Berry "you [are part of] the Black Workers for Justice? What is this? Don't you think that we are in a period more like the 1930s, you know, Black and white unite and fight?" Berry responded to his long-time brother in the struggle:

> What we did not have in the 1930s was the 1960s...we had a Black revolution, a Black upsurge, where demands on the system and reforms that were won, were perceived by many whites as a loss to them, as something being taken away from them. But the 60s produced a kind of Black leadership, a Black movement that's now able to lead. The question is, will white workers unite with the leadership of the Black working class?[6]

The question that Abner Berry posed to his old comrade is the question that guided BWFJ's work, vision, and perspective for four decades. More than just an abstract guiding question, BWFJ sought to answer Berry's query through a rigorous organizational program that was

[5] Muhammad, "Black Workers for Justice Group Oral History Interview."
[6] Ibid.

embedded in the day-to-day lives of the Black working class. Berry and Haywood's reunion in 1983 represents more than just old comrades reconnecting; it is an example of the incomparable political thinking, debate, and wide range of experiences/networks that went into building Black Workers for Justice.

Black Workers Take the Lead: The Southern Freedom Movement and the Building of Black Workers for Justice, *1981-1988* fills a gap in the scholarship on the Black Freedom Struggle in the post-Black Power Era. More specifically, *Black Workers Take the Lead* will be useful to those engaged in the struggle for Black liberation and workers' rights in the twenty-first century. What I mean by this is that BWFJ not only provides useful and relevant insights through its political philosophy and action, but also through its organizational structure and organizing methodology. It is important to note that BWFJ fought for workers' rights, economic justice, healthcare, and environmental justice, not from an advocacy point of view but from the perspective of being members of the Black working class themselves. BWFJ's entire organizational leadership was workers; some worked city jobs across the state of North Carolina, some were janitors, postal workers, teachers, health care workers, and others worked at legal services. For most of its history, BWFJ had no paid staff but still managed to carry out meaningful and impactful work.

BWFJ's history serves as a window into major subfields of African American history: Black worker resistance, Black women's history, Black internationalism, and the southern freedom struggle. Engaged in intensive activities and campaigns, this dissertation grapples with the questions: How did BWFJ deal with the question of burnout? How did they not deal with the question of burn out? What errors did they make? How did BWFJ contribute to the expansive post-Black Power era Black Freedom Struggle? In my estimation, BWFJ's history should be

learned from not only because the organization has the potential to inspire people to fight against injustices and exploitation, but the organization's history also shows people *how* to fight against these societal ills.

Black Workers Take the Lead is an organizational history of Black Workers for Justice that situates the organization's founding as part of and connected to a longer tradition of Black liberation and labor struggles. Put another way, this dissertation argues that though BWFJ was founded in 1982, any sufficient and complete examination of the organization requires an understanding of its direct roots in past movements. This dissertation has two major aims in unpacking the contributions of BWFJ to the post-Black Power era Black freedom struggle.

The first main objective of this dissertation is to uncover the network of activists and mentors from the mid-twentieth century that made the 1982 founding of BWFJ possible. Several mentors helped shape BWFJ's organizational philosophy and methodology. In addition to benefiting from the mentorship of Abner Berry, activists in BWFJ were also mentored by chemist Jim Grant who dedicated his life to the Civil Right Movement in the 1960s. According to historian Tim Tyson, Grant is "a true stalwart of the civil rights movement and one of the most important civil rights activists in the state's history, or certainly in the civil rights era."[7] Grant worked with the Southern Conference Educational Fund, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Commission for Racial Justice, and Farmworkers Legal Services and wrote articles about the South for *Southern Exposure*, the *Southern Patriot*, and the *African World*. Veteran organizers like Berry and Grant played an active role in helping build the organization and brought their own unique leadership qualities. In other words, Berry and Grant were to

[7] Jim Morrill, "Jim Grant to be honored as a voice for the voiceless," *The Charlotte Observer*, February 27, 2015.

BWFJ, what Ella Baker was to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).[8] Beyond Berry and Grant, other members had experiences in past movements and organizations that were useful in the building of BWFJ. For example, founding members had been active in the Revolutionary Action Movement, the African People's Party, the Student Organization for Black Unity, Harlem Fight Back, the Amical Cabral/Paul Robeson Collective, the African Liberation Support Committee, and the Black United Front.[9] As part of these organizations, soon-to-be BWFJ members were mentored by activists such as Queen Mother Audley Moore, James Houghton, and Howard (Stretch) Johnson.[10] Having this level of experience and mentorship, BWFJ was able to remain an active and functioning organization for over forty years and were able to avoid common errors that were known to destroy or cause splits in Black freedom organizations. The rare amount of political maturity that was represented in BWFJ and the

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[8] In the 1960s, as students began to challenge segregation through sit-ins, Ella Baker, a long-time organizer in the Black freedom struggle, saw the mass direct action being led by college students as having the potential to be more than a sit-in movement. She encouraged the students to build an organization and think about what it would mean to engage in a long-term struggle against racism, economic exploitation, and voter suppression. For more on Baker's leadership style and her commitment to developing other leadership see Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker And the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC And the Black Awakening of The 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

[9] When Saladin Muhammad was a member of the Revolutionary Action Movement, an organization that had a close relationship with and members who were part of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Muhammad has said on a number of occasions the organizing formula and his organizing of Black workers in the South was inspired by and drew from the playbook of the League. In fact, during many of BWFJ's struggles Saladin Muhammad would consult and seek the advice of General Baker, one of the League's top leaders.

[10] Queen Mother Audley Moore was active in the CPUSA at the same-time as Berry and mentored BWFJ members who were part of the Revolutionary Action Movement and later the African People's Party. For more on Moore see Erik S. McDuffie and Komozi Woodard, "'If you're in a country that's progressive, the woman is progressive": Black Women Radicals and The Making of the Politics and Legacy of Malcolm X," *Biography* 36, no. 13 (2013): 508; Keisha Blain, "'To Keep Alive the Teachings of Garvey and the Work of the UNIA': Audley Moore, Black Women's Activism, and Nationalist Politics during the Twentieth Century" *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* (2018): 83; Erik S. McDuffie "'I wanted a Communist philosophy, but I wanted us to have a chance to organize our people': the diasporic radicalism of Queen Mother Audley Moore and the origins of black power" *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 3, No. 2, (2010), 181-195; Shafeah M'Balia, "Remembering Queen Mother Moore," *Black Perspectives*, March 1, 2019, https://www.aaihs.org/remembering-queen-mother-moore/. For more on James Houghton and Howard (Stretch) Johnson see Sam Roberts, "James Haughton, Who Fought Racial Barriers in Building Trades, Dies at 86," *The New York Times*, May 5, 2016; Howard Eugene Johnson, *A Dancer in the Revolution: Stretch Johnson, Harlem Communist at the Cotton Club* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

organization's ability to masterfully bring together various political tendencies, prepared them to fight against the presidency of an "anti-civil rights leader who had little compassion for the poor, dismantled social welfare programs, and ratcheted up a racist war on Drugs that targeted Black."[11]

The second objective of *Black Workers Take the Lead* is to use the history of BWFJ as a window into understanding Black life and resistance during the last two decades of the twentieth century. This dissertation argues that the history of BWFJ belongs to a larger story about the world and movement in which they organized. That is, BWFJ did not have a narrow conception of freedom and how to achieve it. Nor did they have a narrow perspective of the power structure they were up against. While the main priority of the organization was to demonstrate the centrality of southern workers and workplaces in the Black liberation movement, they also understood their struggle as being far from isolated or separate from other movements for social change. In addition to concentrating on organizing workers in the Reagan era, BWFJ also organized on issues outside of the workplace. They organized for Black political power and self-determination on the local and national level; and they fought against U.S. imperialism and Reagan's foreign policy by linking the struggles of Black workers to the struggles of oppressed people in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. In addition to exploring the national and international impact of BWFJ in this period, I demonstrate that BWFJ's history contributes to the scholarship on the history of North Carolina. The organization's history corroborates that in the latter part of the twentieth century, North Carolina continued and maintained its role as a key state in the struggle for Black freedom and workers' rights.

[11] Daniel S. Lucks, *Reconsidering Reagan: Racism, Republicans, and the Road to Trump* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020), 6.

On the methodological front, *Black Workers Take the Lead* will utilize a range of primary source documents to support its arguments and three main objectives. When writing an organizational history, the records, publications, and personal notebooks of organizational members are indispensable to incorporate into this type of historical writing. At the same time, when writing an organizational history, the written word is often unable to fully capture an organization's entire significance or impact. Though not always available, scholars of organizational history reach new heights when they are able to conduct oral history interviews with key organizational leaders and members. Therefore, in addition to consulting physical documents and the organization's newspaper *Justice Speaks*, *Black Workers Take the Lead* also includes group and individual oral history interviews to tell the organization's history. Oral history approaches not only lead to a greater understanding of the organization, but they also rightfully center and incorporate the thoughts and perspectives of the individuals who made the organization the topic of historical inquiry. This dissertation will also incorporate the dozens of VHS tapes, cassette tapes, and photos that are housed in current BWFJ institutions and different members' homes throughout the state of North Carolina.

The 1980s, North Carolina, and Historiographical Foundations

> Black and minority workers in general don't have to accept Reagan's oppressive racist policies. A campaign can, and must be built immediately to challenge the brutal direction of the US economy and political system. The attacks against Black voting rights, political power and national liberation of Black people, particularly in the Black Belt South as an oppressed nation, are the most immediate targets of the Reagan government strategy.[12]
>
> Black Workers for Justice, 1985

Historian Robin D.G. Kelley argues that the 1980s "were revolutionary times politically and theoretically" in the United States and the world.[13] *Black Workers Take the Lead* argues that

[12] "REAGAN POLICIES PRO APARTHEID PRO NATIONAL OPPRESSION IN US: BUILD CAMPAIGN AGAINST REAGANS' EXEC. ORDER!" *Justice Speaks*, September 1985, 3.
[13] Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communist During the Great Depression,* xii.

BWFJ did not just simply exist as an organization during the times Kelley is referring to, they contributed to the struggle that made the 1980s a revolutionary decade. Despite playing a role in making the 1980s a revolutionary decade, BWFJ has received no significant attention from historians. One of the reasons that historians have overlooked BWFJ and its contributions to the 1980s is because the organization's activities during that time were primarily concentrated in local and often times rural workplaces and communities. That is, for the years that this dissertation explores (1981-1988) BWFJ achieved victories and experienced growth but largely emerging in the Black Belt region of North Carolina. It was not until the 1990s that Black Workers for Justice began to gain nation recognition and more intentionally expand its work beyond North Carolina. Another reason that BWFJ has been overlooked is because historians overlook the political significance of the last two decades of the twentieth century and resistance movements and organizations that formed.

Indeed, the 1980s is an underdeveloped but growing area of scholarly inquiry in African American historiography. To date, the majority of scholarship on this decade explores the presidency of Ronald Reagan and the conservative political and cultural shift ushered in by his administration.[14] Reagan "sided with the white supremacist" and caused such a major conservative and racist shift in politics that historian Daniel S. Lucks defined the 1980s as the "new nadir" for African Americans.[15] Certainly, Reagan's presidency and the wide range of suffering that it caused for people in the United States and across the world is deserving of

[14] See Lucks, *Reconsidering Reagan: Racism, Republicans, and the Road to Trump*; Rick Perlstein, *ReaganLand: America's Right Turn 1976-1980* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020); Doug Rossiow, *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Will Bunch, *Tear Down This Myth: The Right-Wing Distortion of the Reagan Legacy* (New York: Free Press, 2010).

[15] Lucks, *Reconsidering Reagan: Racism, Republicans, and the Road to Trump*, 13. The term "Nadir" was coined by historian Rayford Logan in *The Negro In American Life And Thought; The Nadir, 1877-1901*. Logan argues that 1877 (after reconstruction) to 1901 "represented the lowest point… in the African American historical experience." See Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *What is African American History?* (Malden, MA: Polity Press), 18. In other words, Lucks rightfully argues that the 1980s was a new all-time low for African Americans.

scholarly attention. This top-down approach, however, should not be divorced from an analysis of organized movements that fought against the inhumane and oppressive policies of his administration. With the exception of Dan Berger and Emily K. Hobson's edited collection, *Remaking Radicalism: A Grassroots Documentary Reader of the United States, 1973-2001,* and a couple of journal articles, the Black freedom struggle of the 1980s is an overlooked and underappreciated historical time period.[16] Though the body of scholarship on the 1980s and the late twentieth century is in a rudimentary stage, *Black Workers Take the Lead* seeks to build and expand on the exciting scholarly frameworks and interpretations of this growing area of scholarly exploration. In their edited collection, Berger and Hobson argue that the late twentieth century was not an era "dominated by conservative retrenchment." Rather, they firmly assert that it was a time when radical activists were "Remaking Radicalism" and embracing "new strategies, ideas, and networks--responses that won concessions, built power, and altered the terms of struggle."[17]

While Berger and Hobson's usage of the term "Remaking Radicalism" is an accurate depiction of the movement in the last three decades of the twentieth century, the themes that are explored in *Remaking Radicalism* do not fully capture the entire "remaking" process that occurred during that time. Although the South is the region that birthed radicalism and maintained it for centuries, Berger and Hobson's text has no discussion of political movements in the Southern United States. With the emergence of Black Power in the mid-1960s, the main

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[16] Dan Berger & Emily K. Hobson, *Remaking Radicalism: A Grassroots Documentary Reader of the United States, 1973-2001* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2020); Lashawn Harris, "Beyond the Shooting: Eleanor Gray Bumpurs, Identity Erasure, and Family Activism against Police Violence," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 20, no. 1 (2018): 86-109; Keisha Blain, "'We will overcome whatever [it] is the system has become today": Black Women's Organizing Against Police Violence in New York City in the 1980s" *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 20, no. 1 (2018): 110-121.
[17] Berger and Hobson, *Remaking Radicalism*, 3.

focus of the Black liberation movement went from a rural and southern-based movement to a more urban- and northern-focused movement. I argue that with the election of an anti-civil rights president and the political line that Black people in the South are an oppressed nation, there was a renewed effort to reconcentrate the Black liberation movement in the geographic location that was at the heart of the Civil Rights Movement (the movement Reagan firmly opposed), the rural South.

In September of 1981, at a Rural Training Conference sponsored by The National Legal Service Corporation, Saladin Muhammad delivered a passionate presentation titled "Organizing Black Rural Communities in the South." During his presentation, he urged the conference of legal minds to "come to grips in the 1980's, with the fact, that litigation is becoming an increasingly less plausible weapon."[18] As he discussed the extreme underdevelopment, poverty, economic exploitation, and lack of Black self-determination in Black majority counties in the rural South, he challenged the conference attendees to take action. Muhammad suggested that the way to deal with the ongoing and worsening crisis in the South, was to return to the organizing philosophy that made the Civil Rights Movement possible. In essence, Muhammad was calling for a reprioritizing of the South in the movement for freedom and justice. A year later, the crisis in the South that Muhammad discussed in his presentation would be the foundation for the founding of Black Workers for Justice. With the establishment of BWFJ, a new movement was being built in the South-- where the majority of African Americans lived-- and North Carolina, unsurprisingly, was an important state in this new era of struggle during the 1980s.

In addition to BWFJ's history contributing to a larger body of scholarship on the 1980s, the organization's history also contributes to scholarship on North Carolina's social movement

[18] Saladin Muhammad, "Organizing Black Rural Communities in the South" (Speech, Atlanta, Georgia, September 17-20), 1.

history. Throughout the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, North Carolina was an important site of struggle for the Black freedom and labor movements in the United States. In the 1880s and 1890s, it was home of the multi-racial and multi-class fusion movement that won state power and began making progressive changes in North Carolina. This multi-racial and democratically-elected coalition was tragically destroyed after the white-supremist-motivated Wilmington Massacre of 1898, the only successful coup d'état in United States history. In the twentieth century, when the Congress of Industrial Organization (C.I.O) was attempting to wage a struggle to build trade unions in the South after World War II, Black workers in North Carolina were the most responsive to this mass unionizing effort. At the same time that the C.I.O was trying to organize southern workers, an effort also known as "Operation Dixie," Black workers at a tobacco plant in Winston Salem, North Carolina waged a historic struggle against the largest tobacco manufacturing company in the world.

Later in the century, North Carolina was still an important state in the Black freedom and labor struggles. In the 1960s, the state was the birthplace of the sit-in movement and the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. North Carolina is also where Robert F. Williams and his wife Mable Robinson Williams gained national attention for his call for armed self-defense against white supremacist violence; it is where Floyd McKissick founded Soul City; and where Nelson Johnson and other Historically Black Colleges and University students formed the Student Organization for Black Unity.[19] Subsequently, during the 1970s Black workers in North Carolina played a leading role in the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile

[19] See Timothy B Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009); Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, "'God Has Spared Me to Tell My Story': Mabel Robinson Williams and the Civil Rights–Black Power Movement." *The Black Scholar* 43, no. 1-2 (2013): 69-88; Thomas Healy, *Soul City: Race, Equality, and the Lost Dream of an American Utopia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2021); Jelani Favors, *Shelter in a Time of Storm: How Black Colleges Fostered Generations of Leadership and Activism* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

Workers Union's (ACTWU) struggle against the largest textile company in the world (J.P. Stevens).[20] Around that same time, North Carolina was in the national spotlight for the Charlotte Three case, the Wilmington Ten case, Joan Little's escape from prison after defending herself from a sexual assault attempt by a white prison guard, and the Greensboro Massacre in 1979, where five Communist Workers Party members were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi Party.[21]

Though the state has a conspicuous history of committed activists, the current scholarship on North Carolina and African American history suggests that after the Greensboro Massacre, North Carolina was no longer a key state in the movement for social transformation. Challenging this, *Black Workers Take the Lead* argues that the history of Black Workers for Justice reveals that North Carolina continued its role as a leading force in the Black freedom and labor movements. The key role that North Carolina occupied in the Black freedom and workers movement was for a reason.[22] In the 1980s, North Carolina had the lowest number of unions than any other state in the country. The state's lack of a union presence and organized workforce sparked companies and industries to move their operations from the unionized North to the non-

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[20] Timothy J. Minchin, *"Don't Sleep With Stevens": The JP Stevens Campaign and the Struggle to Organize the South 1963-1980* (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 2005); Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

[21] J. Christopher Schutz, "The Burning of America: Race, Radicalism, and the 'Charlotte Three' Trial in 1970s North Carolina" *The North Carolina Historical Review* 76, no. 1 (1999): 43-65; Kenneth Robert Janken, *The Wilmington Ten: Violence, Injustice, and the Rise of Black Politics in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance--A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 246; Sally Avery Bermanzohn, *Through Survivors' Eyes: From the Sixties to the Greensboro Massacre* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003).

[22] When I refer to North Carolina as playing "key" role in the 1980s, I am referring to the movements that were sparked and maintained during that time. For example, North Carolina is the place where the environmental justice movement was sparked and maintained in the 1980s. North Carolina was the location in the 1980s where three Black former textile workers opened a cooperative bakery in New Bern, North Carolina. In the 1980s, North Carolina was the headquarters for important freedom movement organizations like the Commission for Racial Justice and the Institute for Southern Studies and Southerns for Economic Justice.

unionized South for cheaper labor and very little accountability. Therefore, there is no surprise that BWFJ was founded when it was and was part of a strong workers movement. Recognizing its unique role, BWFJ did not seek to craft its organizing program to only focus on the existing labor movement in the state and the already organized workers. Instead, the organization took on the difficult but necessary task of organizing the unorganized: the majority of workers in the state.

With their commitment to organizing the unorganized, BWFJ not only continued North Carolina's profound history of resistance, they also added on to its revolutionary tradition. To borrow Berger and Hobson's term, BWFJ activists "remade" North Carolina's tradition of radicalism. In *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South*, historian Robert Korstad coined the term "civil rights unionism" to describe how tobacco workers in Winston-Salem "combined class consciousness with race solidarity and looked to cross-class institutions such as the Black church as a key base of support" and "who saw trade unions not just as a means of advancing the interest of their members but as the generative force in a larger struggle for economic democracy."[23] Moreover, the unionizing effort in Winston Salem had a gender component and encouraged women's leadership. The Black workers in Winston Salem also took seriously the importance of voting rights and workers participation in the political process. This example of workers seeing beyond the workplace in North Carolina demonstrates the unbreakable marriage between Black freedom and labor.

While the characteristics that made the struggle at the tobacco company a great example of Civil Rights Unionism is almost identical to the work that BWFJ would engage in decades

[23] Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 3.

later, *Black Workers Take the Lead* argues that BWFJ took the struggle a step further and moved beyond the question of civil rights. BWFJ had more of a direct anti-imperialist position that was incorporated as a central component of its work. BWFJ argued that the working and living conditions in Eastern North Carolina were tantamount to conditions faced by those in third world countries, thus making the South an internal colony in the United States. BWFJ was also not a trade union, they were a workers' organization who at their founding declared themselves "a workplace-based community organization," allowing for the merger of labor and Black freedom movement to reach a higher stage than it had been able to in the past. BWFJ's history and forty years of work represents a continuation of the revolutionary character of the movement in the twentieth century, but more than that, they represent a political force with an overwhelming number of lessons on how to fight capitalism, racism, and imperialism in a constantly shifting and growing Empire.

The history of BWFJ contributes to the history of African American working-class activism, but more specifically, it contributes to the subfield of African American organizational history. This distinction is important because an organizational history represents the coming together of individuals to take collective action against racism, classism, and sexism, whereas the scholarship on activism primarily highlights the role of individuals involved in the Black freedom struggle. A history of BWFJ joins a body of scholarship on African American organizations, such as: SNCC, the Black Panther Party, the Revolutionary Action Movement, the National of Islam, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, and the Republic of New Afrika -- whose history can inspire and inform contemporary Black freedom organizations.

For the last couple of decades, there has been an effort among scholars and activists to unearth the interconnectedness of history and current-day social movements. For the most part,

though, these important efforts have focused primarily on the usefulness of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. While the importance of these two movements cannot be overstated, only concentrating on that historic period of struggle leaves out three decades of important social justice activity and shifts in the white power structure during the twentieth century. *Black Workers Take the Lead* argues that while it is important to understand the organizing methodology, vision, and work that took place during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, it is equally important to understand the movement of the last two decades. Some would argue that the drastic shift that took place under Reagan put oppressed people in a new terrain of struggle that is still impacting our world today and the social injustices we are fighting against.

As someone who has been active in North Carolina's movement for social change since high school, I have noticed that BWFJ's unwavering principles and commitment to the cause of freedom has made it difficult for members to have time to discuss their organizational history, causing activists in North Carolina and the South to lack the knowledge and awareness of BWFJ's contributions to the existing movement in the state and South. Since its founding, BWFJ prioritized bringing about change and sustaining the freedom struggle rather than broadcasting its organizational accomplishments or seeking some type of fame or "credibility." While an admirable approach to the freedom struggle, in my estimation, we have reached a point in the struggle for justice where it would be a disservice if BWFJ's history remains untold. This dissertation maintains that BWFJ is one of North Carolina's best kept secrets and for the future of the state's social movements, BWFJ should not only be understood, but their contributions and scope of work must be studied and learned from.

Chapter Outline

Black Workers Take the Lead is divided into five chapters that take a chronological and thematic approach. The first half of this dissertation examines the founding of Black Workers for Justice and its roots as an Eastern North Carolina-based organization. The second half unravels BWFJ's decisions to make organizational adjustments to increase its capacity to become a stronger and permanent force in the struggle of the Black working class.[24] While an organizational history, this dissertation can also be conceptualized as a collective biography. That is, biographical information on different BWFJ members will be included to illuminate the individuals who sacrificed and committed an immeasurable amount of time carrying out the historic work of the organization.

Chapter 1, "Rocky Mount, the Kmart Struggle, and Workers Empowerment," examines the inner-workings, organizing methodology, strategies, and tactics of the local Kmart campaign that ignited the founding of Black Workers for Justice. This chapter explores how a local campaign turned into a statewide movement and the role of Rocky Mount's African American community, traditional civil rights organizations, and in local Black worker tradition in

[24] When I expand this project into a book manuscript, I will examine how BWFJ's momentum from the 1980s informed its organizing in the last decade of the twentieth century. Moreover, I seek to unpack how through its independent institutions, internationalism, and connecting workers struggles to community struggle and lessons from the 1980s, BWFJ was able to build upon and strengthen those things in the 1990s. For example, as the environmental impacts on health became a clear concern impacting workers, BWFJ built a strong relationship with the Student Rural Health coalition to connect health issues to a larger project/movement for revolutionary change. This work manifested itself in building permanent and still functioning People's Health Clinics in Fremont and Tillery, NC that screened workers to identify problems caused in the workplace or that came as a result of terrible working conditions. BWFJ also organized Legal Clinics where lawyers provided workers with information on their rights as workers. On the international front, at the dawn of the last decade in the twentieth century, leaders of BWFJ helped establish the Caribbean International Education Committee and participated in five delegations to Cuba between 1989-1992. As part of these delegations, BWFJ intentionally made it so workers from different workplaces in North Carolina went on these delegations and were able to connect their struggle in the South to that of the Cuban Revolution. These trips expanded on a long tradition of African Americans expressing solidarity with the Cuban Revolution.

supporting the Kmart workers fight for fairness and justice.[25] A core part of the campaign is told through the experience and leadership of Saladin and Naeema Muhammad. Given the central role of the Muhammads, and Saladin in particular, to BWFJ, I bring to the surface the roots of Saladin Muhammad's organizing philosophy and how it connected him to like-minded activist.

The struggle at the Kmart store in Rocky Mount inspired workers throughout Eastern North Carolina. Chapter 2, "Fremont, Voting Rights, and Building Black Workers for Justice," uncovers BWFJ workers-led campaign at Hardwood Dimensions Mill in Fremont and BWFJ's expansion as a statewide organization. Moreover, this chapter examines BWFJ's "theory of change" and why the organization decided to build a Black workers organization in the 1980s in the Black Belt region of the South. I also explore BWFJ's participation and leadership in the struggle for voting rights and the fight against voter suppression in Eastern North Carolina. Though mainly an Eastern North Carolina organization, this chapter concludes by examining the Raleigh roots of BWFJ and the role activist there played in the early and future activities of the organization.

Chapter 3, "Building the Identity and Consciousness of the Black Working Class: The Workers School, Justice Speaks, the Trade Union Commission, and the Fruit of Labor Singing Ensemble," explores how BWFJ sought to build a strong organization and consolidate its political program. Chapter 3 unpacks the importance of the years 1985-1986 for BWFJ. It is when the organization held a workers' school, organized its own newspaper, strengthened its work in the trade union movement, and developed the cultural wing of its organization. These two years, especially 1985, was a turning point for BWFJ. When Ashaki Binta moved to North

[25] The struggle in Rocky Mount that had a direct influence in the work of BWFJ was the 1978 Sanitation Strike where an African American sanitation worker was unjustly fired. The worker, Alexander Evans, helped lead the fight of his unjust firing and joined the solidarity movement for the Kmart workers. Evans would later go on to be a founding member of Black Workers for Justice and the first chairperson of the Rocky Mount Chapter.

Carolina it expanded the organizations capacity and increased its ability to implement its growing organizational objectives. Overall, this chapter explores how BWFJ identified a problem or gap in the needs of the workers movement and offered solutions. More directly, it showed how BWFJ used education, the press, trade unionism, and culture as a key strategy to achieve workers power and Black political power.

Conscious of the importance of Black women in the African American freedom struggle, BWFJ formed a Women's Commission. In most of the workplace struggle they were involved in, Black women were not only the ones being mistreated, but they were also the ones leading the resistance and making the greatest sacrifice. Chapter 4, "'Women Hold Up Half the Sky': The Women's Commission of Black Workers for Justice and Internationalism," discusses the founding, ideological perspective, and the commitment of BWFJ's Women's Commission (WC) to building a "women's workers consciousness" throughout the growing workers movement in North Carolina. In addition to focusing on the WC's theoretical contribution and origins, this chapter argues that the WC was the heartbeat of BWFJ's internationalism. I explore a leader of the WC, Rukiya Dillahunt and her delegation to Nicaragua in 1986 to oppose the US support for the Contras. I also spend time exploring the WC's commitment to International Working Women's Day and connecting the local to the international.

BWFJ's decision to spend 1985-1986 strengthening its organizing program, paid off and resulted in the organization being able to achieve victories in the workplace and community. Its decisions early on also gave it longevity, relevance, and useful to the movement for Black freedom and workers' rights. Chapter 5, "Schlage Lock and the Fight for Economic and Environmental Justice," is a detailed examination of how BWFJ fought against a plant closing and against environmental racism in Rocky Mount in 1988. This chapter examines the

organizing, mobilizing, and workers empowerment strategy that developed in response to the Schlage Manufacturing Company's decision to close its Rocky Mount plant and move its operations to Mexico. Schlage Lock is important because it shows how BWFJ's reputation and short history positioned them to be able to provide direction and leadership for the Schlage Lock campaign. The Schlage Lock struggle also laid the groundwork for future BWFJ organizing and revealed the potential of its organizing methodology. In other words, the fight against the Schlage Lock Manufacturing Company elevated BWFJ's organizing program and political trajectory.

To conclude, the Epilogue of "Black Workers Take the Lead" reflects on BWFJ's legacy by examining its 40th Anniversary celebrations. In the Epilogue, I offer reflections on the 40th Anniversary Banquet that was organized in 2022 and the 40th anniversary conference panel that was organized at the South Labor Studies Conference. By reflecting on these two events, the impact of BWFJ on the current movement for social change in North Carolina, the South, and country can be seen. The Epilogue closes with an overview and listing of the major organizing campaigns and efforts of Black Workers for Justice in the 1990s and early 2000s.

CHAPTER ONE: Rocky Mount, the Kmart Struggle, and Workers Empowerment

Black workers have been falsely accused of violating store policies that have never been made clear by the management. They have received verbal abuse and insults and they have been deliberately framed-up in order to justify their firing and punishment….We feel the things that are happening at K-mart are a slap in the face to the entire black community and we hope to say to K-Mart and its management from the local level to the corporate level that if they're going to respect our dollar they must also respect our person.[26]

The Rev. Thomas L. Walker, 1981

At a time when unemployment is sky high, side by side with inflation, and "Reaganomics" is spending more money for guns in El Salvador and everywhere else you can think of, the K-mart corporation is carrying out the old, racist principle of making Blacks the last to be hired and the first fired! We, the Black Workers for Justice, call on you, the concerned public, to continue to honor the boycott... Remember, if we don't stand together for something, we'll be divided and fall for anything. We are not troublemakers or freeloaders, as some would claim; we want our jobs back and decent working conditions.[27]

Black Workers for Justice at Kmart, 1982

On December 28, 1981, during a press conference held at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, Mildred Davis, a recently fired Kmart employee, told a reporter with *The Evening Telegram* that Kmart's all-white management had been "monitor[ing] and tak[ing] disciplinary action against any little thing that the black employees do but the white employees can repeat the same incident and it's overlooked."[28] Davis was joined by Christine Smith, another recently fired Black Kmart employee who was also tired of the constant mistreatment in the workplace. As the workers sought to wage a battle against the local Kmart store in Rocky Mount, Davis, Smith, and other Black workers at the store gained the support of Rev. Thomas L. Walker, the head pastor at Rocky Mount's Ebenezer Baptist Church and leader of the Concerned Citizens Association (CCA). At the press conference, Walker expressed his unequivocal support for the workers and encouraged the community to do the same. Walker told

[26] Vicki Wiggins, "Group Charges Job Discrimination," *The Evening Telegram,* December 29, 1981, 9.
[27] Black Workers for Justice, "Boycott K-Mart! Please Support Our Struggle," document in author possession.
[28] Wiggins, "Group Charges Job Discrimination," 9.

The Evening Telegram that "We are calling upon the entire black community and all just-minded people to support the struggle of the black workers at K-mart against racist treatment and injustice."[29] When Davis, Smith and Walker declared the actions of Kmart unjust, it was the start of an important local movement led by Black workers and supported by community members and local leaders.

This chapter examines the racist working conditions that led to the press conference at Ebenezer Baptist Church and the workers' deciding to commit themselves to fighting racism at Rocky Mount's Kmart store. The struggle at Kmart was not an ordinary act of worker resistance, the Kmart struggle ignited the founding of Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ). With the Kmart struggle being an integral part of BWFJ's founding, this chapter offers a detailed examination of the Kmart struggle and unpacks key turning points in the three-month long campaign for justice. Moreover, this chapter reveals the Black liberation movement experience that guided the organizing and vision of what would become Black Workers for Justice at Kmart (BWFJ at Kmart). I assert that the Kmart struggle is where Black women's political will and determination met a political strategy and organizing philosophy of workers empowerment.

At first, when the workers were experiencing problems, they tried to resolve the problems by going to the Kmart headquarters but were unsuccessful. When three workers were unjustly fired from Kmart, they reached out to the community for support and were introduced to seasoned activists, Saladin and Naeema Muhammad. The Muhammads had roots in Rocky Mount and a political experience in the African Peoples Party (APP) in Philadelphia that was instrumental to helping the Kmart workers fight against their unjust firing. This chapter thoroughly explores the work of the Muhammads in Philadelphia, and Saladin's experience in

[29] Ibid.

the labor movement as Secretary General of the APP. Understanding the Muhammad's work in Philadelphia in the 1970s is foundational to understanding their leadership and support for the Kmart workers in 1981. Further, the Black liberation movement perspective at the center of the Kmart struggle helped transform a workplace struggle at a retail store into a statewide campaign. More specifically, this chapter situates the resistance of the Kmart workers as part of a local Black worker tradition in Rocky Mount while simultaneously arguing that the Kmart struggle incorporated another worker tradition that had roots outside of Rocky Mount and the South. Ultimately, the Kmart struggle and the organizing traditions that it brought together, set the tone for Black worker resistance throughout the state in the 1980s.

The Fight Against Kmart: An Internal Struggle Turns into a Community Struggle

While the press conference with Rev. Walker on December 28, was the workers first public action against Kmart, Davis and her Black co-workers had a history of challenging Kmart's unequal treatment. Prior to the December press conference and the workers taking their struggle to the community, Black employees at Rocky Mount's Kmart store tried to push for change through an internal process. The workers met with local Kmart management on several occasions, but nothing changed; the working conditions of Black workers remained the same and the mistreatment from the store's white management led by H.C. Johnson continued.[30]

Following the failure and inaction from local management, Davis and thirteen of her Black co-workers sent a petition to the Kmart headquarters in Troy, Michigan and Atlanta, Georgia.[31] As part of their petition, the workers demanded that the company's national office lead the process of addressing and bringing an end to the issues they were experiencing on the

[30] "Black Workers for Justice at K-Mart," document in possession of author.
[31] Wiggins, "Group Charges Job Discrimination," 9.

job. To properly communicate with headquarters as to why an intervention was necessary, the workers included specific examples of unfair treatment and discrimination in their petition. They informed headquarters that at their Kmart store, "Black workers are timed whole on break, white workers are not."[32] Another example in the workers petition demonstrated how common and serious racism was in the store. When two white workers and one Black worker failed to complete a task, "only the one black worker was written up, the two white workers were not."[33] Other examples of racism that was listed in the petition were specific to the actions of the store manager H.C. Johnson and how he targeted Black workers. The detailed petition and well-documented abuse against the store's Black workers gave Kmart no choice but to respond.

Figure 3: A photo of the Kmart Store in Rocky Mount, North Carolina from 1982 that was featured in *The Nashville Graphic*.

When the workers decided to send a petition to Kmart headquarters, they expected the national office to offer solutions to their collective and well documented experiences of racism.

[32] "Black Workers for Justice at K-Mart," document in possession of author.
[33] Ibid.

Weeks after the petition was sent, Kmart sent a representative from its national office to Rocky Mount for a meeting with management. Although it was the workers who submitted the petition and requested intervention, while in town, the representative from Kmart did not meet with or acknowledge any of the Black workers. Instead of bringing relief or addressing the concerns that were in the petition, Kmart's headquarters sided with the racist store management and sought to squash worker resistance by punishing the workers who took a bold stance against racism. After the visit from the Kmart representative, "Black workers who had signed the petition began to be harassed by management and several were framed up and fired on false and outrageous charges."[34] For example, a worker who was employed by Kmart for eight years was falsely accused and fired for stealing 71 cents. In addition to the firing of the eight-year employee for fabricated reasons, three other workers were fired in a similar and unjust manner. Of the four workers who were fired, three of them refused to accept their unjust firing and decided to take their struggle to the next stage. In this new stage of struggle, the fight against Kmart was no longer internal and would develop a public character.

Despite Ronald Reagan firing thousands of striking PATCO workers months prior and his administration's bold and unapologetic attack on organized labor, the recently fired Kmart workers were not easily deterred. Mildred Davis, Christine Smith, and Helen Solomon believed that they had "nowhere to turn but to the Black community and all just minded people."[35] The women immediately reached out to local ministers who had a history of supporting Black workers and a meeting was scheduled to be held at Ebenezer Baptist Church. At this meeting was Rev. Walker and about six other ministers who were part of the NAACP and the Black

[34] "Black Workers for Justice at K-Mart," document in possession of author.
[35] Mildred Davis to the Rocky Mount Community, 1982, letter in possession of author.

Ministerial Alliance. Joining the ministers at the meeting with the Kmart workers was Saladin Muhammad (also known as Phil White) who had just moved to town and was not affiliated with a church or organization. Muhammad heard about the meeting from his aunt Roxie Freeman, a piano player and long-time member of Ebenezer Baptist Church. Mrs. Freeman knew about her nephew's political activities in Philadelphia and when he moved to town, she was eager to connect him to local community-activists. While explaining to Muhammad the reason for the meeting at the church and what to expect, Mrs. Freeman told her nephew that her pastor, Rev. Thomas L. Walker "was going to try and save your soul, but he fights around the issues."[36] Meaning, Walker would try and recruit Muhammad to the church and the Christian faith, but more than anything, Rev. Walker was a man of faith that had demonstrated a commitment to civil rights and social justice. Mrs. Freeman's decision to tell her nephew about the meeting was not only the beginning of a relationship between Muhammad and Rev. Walker, but Muhammad's presence at the meeting also had a positive impact on the direction of the Kmart workers' quest for justice.

While attending the meeting at Ebenezer Baptist Church and hearing first-hand from the three Black women workers who were fired, Muhammad did not speak much and mainly listened. Throughout the meeting, he noticed that as the women were talking about the discrimination they experienced at Kmart, some of the ministers were "questioning them in ways that to me, sounded like they had to prove that what they were facing was accurate." They were being asked questions like "are you sure?," "did you follow all the policies," and "did you go up the chain of command?"[37] Muhammad could tell this approach from the ministers was frustrating

[36] Saladin Muhammad, "The Kmart Struggle and Black Workers for Justice's Origins," December 18, 2018, interviewed by Ajamu Dillahunt, recording in possession of the author, Raleigh, NC.
[37] Ibid.

the workers. Noticing this and the ministers' uncertainty about how to move forward, Muhammad decided to share his thoughts about the meeting and the best way to move forward. He asked the workers "did this treatment that led to your firing, is it a condition that most of the workers there were facing? And have y'all ever gotten together to discuss these things and to figure out whether y'all can act together?" The women responded that "people talk about [getting together], but not in a real organized way." Muhammad discussed his experience as a worker and the importance of organizing. He told those gathered at the meeting that "I think it would be good if a meeting could be pulled together among the workers and to be able to come back and meet with the ministers and others with a concrete proposal and plan." Muhammad then asked the workers "is that something y'all are willing to do?" The three women responded with an enthusiastic "yeah!" For Muhammad, as he reflected on the meeting, he felt "that the workers saw in my very brief proposal or question something different then they were feeling in their efforts to get support from the ministerial alliance."[38]

A few days after the meeting at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Muhammad met with the three women workers and about fourteen other Black women Kmart workers. At this meeting, they developed a plan of action and discussed the limitations of approaching the struggle against Kmart as individuals. Because discrimination was involved, some workers thought the only action that needed to take place was a lawsuit. After conversations with Muhammad about the shortcomings of relying on the courts, it was decided among the workers that collective action and establishing their own organization, was the best way forward. Since the fourteen workers gathered at the meeting decided to become an organization, the women were debating on what to call themselves. Muhammad interjected that "well y'all are Black workers and seeking justice at

[38] Ibid.

Kmart" and proposed the women call themselves Black Workers for Justice at Kmart (BWFJ at Kmart). Once the women established their own organization, they used the remainder of the meeting to develop a list of demands, a petition, and a plan of action. According to Muhammad, BWFJ at Kmart served as a workers committee "so that the struggle would also take the character of a struggle at the workplace and building support for a struggle at the workplace. As opposed to [the workers struggle being led by] supporters who got, often times, non-working class empowerment views about how to deal with issues of discrimination."[39]

Having conducted a successful meeting, the next step for the newly formed Black Workers for Justice at Kmart was to schedule a follow-up meeting with the ministers. When BWFJ at Kmart informed the ministers of the plan they had developed, the ministers agreed to support the plan and expressed an overall commitment to the workers and their cause. While obtaining the support of the ministers was important, the workers were even more eager to gain the support of the entire Black community. To do that, BWFJ at Kmart asked the ministers to hold the December 28 press conference to publicly express their support and call for a mass meeting on behalf of the workers. To best mobilize and help facilitate community support, under Rev. Walker's leadership, the minister decided to reactivate the Concerned Citizens Association that Rev. Walker helped establish and lead to support the city's sanitation workers strike in 1978.

Roots of BWFJ at Kmart's Leadership and Organizing Tradition

With all the activity that the Kmart struggle generated within Rocky Mount's African American community, it is important to note that without Saladin Muhammad's involvement the Kmart struggle could have turned out very different. If the struggle remained in the hands of the ministers, it is likely that there would have been no struggle at all. Muhammad's ability to turn a

[39] Ibid.

deep questioning and interrogative meeting into a positive and exciting struggle for workers empowerment required a certain level of skill and political experience. Because of how central his judgment was to the direction of the Kmart struggle, understanding his past experiences that cultivated his leadership skills is indispensable.

By the time he came to Rocky Mount in 1981, Muhammad had over a decade of experience in building organizations and organizing Black workers. Born in Philadelphia's Richard Allen Projects in 1945, by the time Muhammad was a teenager, circumstances at home forced him to join the military in 1962. Stationed at Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and part of the 82nd Airborne Division, Muhammad's four years in the army were transformative both personally and politically. He met the love of his life Naeema Muhammad and was radicalized by his experience in the South and in the U.S. army. Furthermore, Muhammad had family roots in the South and North Carolina in particular. His mother was born and raised in Rocky Mount, North Carolina and still had family there. Growing up, he spent summers in Rocky Mount with family and knew the area well. During his time at Fort Bragg, he regularly visited Rocky Mount to see family and Naeema. His official move there decades later was long in the making and in step with his upbringing.[40]

While Fort Bragg allowed him to be closer to his mother's side of the family and his soon-to-be wife, being in the South also changed his world view and political perspective. One day, after returning to Fort Bragg from visiting Naeema in Rocky Mount, Muhammad's friend and fellow soldier, Stewart, became a victim of racist violence. Stewart had accompanied Muhammad to Rocky Mount and shortly after they returned, Muhammad found Stewart unconscious on his knees with his hands tied behind his back and a rope around his neck. Not far

[40] Saladin Muhammad, "The Revolutionary Action Movement and the African Peoples Party," July 2, 2019, interviewed by Ajamu Dillahunt, recording in possession of the author, Raleigh, NC.

from where Muhammad found Stewart's body, he remembered "there were four white soldiers shinning their shoes." When Muhammad approached them about what happened to Stewart, one of the white soldiers named Wyatt who was 6'4 said to Muhammad with a smirk, "I told yall boys the Klan aint playing around here." When "all hell broke loose," the military said Stewart's death was a suicide. Muhammad firmly maintained that the death of Stewart, who was around the age of 22, was not a suicide because his hands were tied behind his back. On another occasion, Muhammad was in a clothing store in Fayetteville wearing his uniform thinking that "being in an army town, that anybody with a uniform is going to get the highest respect." His experience in the clothing store was far from respectful. The store employee treated them as if they did not belong and made clear their presence was not welcomed.[41]

When Muhammad left the military in 1965, he moved back to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with his wife Naeema. Living in Philadelphia and "and still upset with the racism and arrogance of US soldiers," Muhammad got a job working in a Philco plant making televisions, started taking martial arts classes at the St. Paul Community Center, and was active in a youth group that called themselves the Young Afro-Americans. By 1967, Muhammad had made contact with Max Stanford (Muhammad Ahmed) and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM). Ahmed was recruiting for RAM's military-wing, the Black Guards. After receiving a Black Guard Manual from Ahmed, Muhammad took it to others in the Young Afro-Americans and they agreed to join RAM's Black Guard unit. RAM was founded in Ohio in 1962 by students at Central State College, under the leadership of Donald Freeman, Max Stanford (Muhammad Ahmed), and Wanda Marshall. For most of its seven-year history, RAM operated as a "semi-underground" organization that had members in Ohio, California, and Pennsylvania. In

[41] Ibid.

Philadelphia, they openly existed as RAM, in Ohio and California they were known as "The Afro-American Association" and the "Afro-American Institute." As a mainly student and campus-based organization, well-known activists and intellectuals were part of its membership. For example, Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, Cedric Robinson, Michael Simmons, James and Grace Lee Boggs, Ron Keranga, and Tony Monteiro were part of RAM's membership. From its inception, RAM was inspired by and in close contact with Robert F. Williams, the NAACP leader in Monroe, North Carolina who advocated that African Americans adopt the philosophy of armed self-defense in response to white supremacist violence. They distributed and studied William's paper *The Crusader*. Later on, the organization began to establish a relationship with Malcolm X. The organization offered a global and revolutionary nationalist perspective to the movement of the 1960s. Through its journal *Black America* and its newsletter *RAM Speaks*, the organization made clear that they "saw themselves as colonial subjects fighting a 'colonial war at home.'"[42] In sum, RAM's organizational contributions played an important role in direction and formation of Northern, West Coast, and mid-western Black Power organizations.

When RAM dissolved because of government repression and the FBI's COINTELPRO in the late 1960s, a good portion of its leadership committed themselves to and helped build the newly formed APP. Formed out of discussions at the 1968 Black Power conference in Philadelphia, the APP did not believe that "the Democratic Party was going to be the national political framework for advancing any kind of demands for Black liberation." Instead, they formed an independent political party that reflected the revolutionary character and potential of Black struggle at that time. By 1971 the APP had recruited veteran organizers Abner Berry and Queen Mother Moore to its Central Committee and appointed Saladin Muhammad as the Party's

[42] Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 81.

first field chairman (and later Secretary General). As field chairman, Muhammad was tasked with traveling across the country to reestablish contact with former RAM cadre and to build momentum for the First Party Congress in 1971. Party building had him traveling to Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit, New York, and Washington D.C.. In its early years, the APP was focused on building an independent party while also supporting the united front perspective on Black candidates that came out of the '68 Black Power Conference. Being in a high leadership position and responsible for carrying out the party's work, Muhammad interacted with well-known Black liberation leaders, organizations, and events. Muhammad attended and was a participant in the National Black Economic Development Conference, the Black Political Convention in 1972, and the African Liberation Support Committee. As field chairman, he also participated in events and meetings with Amiri Baraka, Howard Fuller, Abdul Alkalimat, General Baker, and Nelson Johnson, attended a meeting with Guyanese scholar and activist Walter Rodney, built coalitions with other major Black liberation organizations in Philadelphia, and was a citizen of the Republic of New Africa.

Like its predecessors in RAM, the APP identified as revolutionary nationalist and engaged in deep study. As revolutionary nationalist, the APP believed that "Black people in the U.S., particularly in the Black Belt South constitutes an oppressed nation." Moreover, Muhammad asserted that the APP "did not have a narrow nationalist view about Black people in the U.S." and offered "a class analysis" when it projected its revolutionary nationalist views. The longtime communist, labor organizer, internationalist, Black freedom activists, and revolutionary nationalist Vicki Garvin stressed the Black Nation in the South should be led by "its working class who establishes structures and institutions with the principle of live let live, sharing

equitable the wealth and resources."[43] The APP's revolutionary nationalism was informed and guided by its regular practice of study. Muhammad remembered the Party reading W.E.B Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*, the newly developed *Black Scholar*, RAM's newspaper *Black America*, *Soul Book, The Liberator,* Mao Zedong's little red book, Lenin, and a number of other leftist publications.[44]

Through its commitment to study and sharpening its analysis on U.S. capitalism and imperialism, by 1975 the Philadelphia chapter of the APP under Muhammad's leadership, began to concentrate its efforts on organizing Black workers and becoming active participants in the labor movement. One of the first major labor struggles of the APP was with the Southeast Pennsylvania Transport Authority (SEPTA) in 1976, now known as Philadelphia Transportation Corporation. SEPTA had cut bus routes in the Black community and raised riding fares, preventing Black working class people from not only riding the bus but causing many of them to miss work. To challenge SEPTA, the APP and other organizations shut down the bus station by forming a human chain.[45] In addition to the human chain, the APP successfully recruited bus drivers to join the protest and help shut down the station. In conjunction with bus drivers, churches, community organizations, and elected officials, the APP helped form the Coalition for Better Transportation in the City (CBTC) and waged a two-month struggle against SPETA.[46] The coalition demanded that there be "no fare increase and the restoration of several bus routes

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[43] Vicki Garvin, "African American Women Leaders in the Struggle for Social Justice" (speech, University of the District of Columbia, Washington, February 14, 1996).
[44] Muhammad, "The Revolutionary Action Movement and the African Peoples Party,"; See link to access RAM's *Black America* publication: http://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC513_scans/RAM/513.RAM.Black.America.Fall.1964.pdf.
[45] Roy Holton, "50,000 riders are stranded by protest against SEPTA," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 24, 1976, 2; "More SEPTA protest threatened," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 5, 1976, 1.
[46] In this coalition, elected officials and churches not only supported, but they were also active participants in the protest, marches, and city council meetings.

cut by SEPTA."[47] The CBTC also demanded "that SEPTA appoint community representatives on its board and recall 250 furloughed SEPTA employees."[48]

Figure 4: A closer photo showing the human chain that was organized by the CBTC and the future leader of BWFJ.

After the building of CBTC and demonstrating the collective power of workers and community organizations, the APP formed the Black Workers Support Committee that consisted of transportation workers, postal workers, and workers from numerous plants in Philadelphia.[49]

When they decided to prioritize labor organizing as a key area of struggle, the APP came into contact with other oppressed communities and workers. A leader in the Puerto Rican Socialist Party recruited Muhammad to work for Legal Services as a labor paralegal. In this position as a paralegal, Muhammad helped organize a union at Legal Services and started to organize workers at various workplaces. Workplace struggles, unions, and organizing the Black working class became the primary focus of the Philadelphia Chapter of the APP. In preparation

[47] Acel Moore, "100 March to City Hall to protest SEPTA cuts," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 31, 1976, 37.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Saladin Muhammad, "The African Peoples Party," interview by Abdul Alkalimat, October 29, 2015.

for the Third-Party Congress in 1977, Muhammad began to recruit Black workers from across the country into the Party. He brought workers from U.S. Steel in Chicago; workers in New Jersey who had formed the United Brothers; and workers from Harlem Fight Back in New York into the Party. Muhammad notes that "we [the APP] was very serious about the class aspect of [the Black liberation movement]."[50] As the Party began to embed itself in the Black working class, a split began to emerge between the East Coast and West Coast within the APP.

At the Party Congress in 1977, the Philadelphia chapter of the APP proposed the Party raise $20,000 for the building of a Labor Commission. While East Coast APP members, such as those in Philadelphia recognized the possibility of multiracial coalition building with labor-focused work, West Coast members feared that extending their work beyond the Black community was harmful to the Black freedom movement. This tension and other internal conflict would eventually lead to a serious split in the APP and its official disbandment around late 1979 and early 1980.[51] Leading the Party for nearly a decade on a local and national level, Muhammad had interacted with, learned from, and debated some of the most brilliant minds in the Black liberation movement. When he arrived in Rocky Mount in 1981, he drew on those past experiences to aid the Kmart workers in their struggle.

Building the Local Movement

In response to the call for a mass meeting on December 29, 1981 to support the Kmart workers, over four hundred people gathered at St. Mark AME Church. There is no surprise that this meeting attracted so many people. The community had a history of mobilizing to support the struggles and resistance of Black workers.[52] Just three years prior, the Black community

[50] Muhammad, "The Kmart Struggle and Black Workers for Justice's Origins."
[51] Ibid.
[52] In addition to the sanitation worker strike, throughout the twentieth century, Black workers in Rocky Mount and the surrounding area have a long history of struggling for unions, civil rights, and voting rights. More specifically, in

mobilized in mass numbers to support Black sanitation workers who went on strike after the unjust firing of their co-worker Alexander Evans. Beyond the sanitation workers strike, the Black working class in Rocky Mount had a long history of communal and collective survival strategies that dates back to the Depression- Era where mutual assistance was commonplace for African American communities.[53] With the collective mindset engraved in their working-class existence and the sanitation strike fresh on their mind, the community continued their support for Black workers by mobilizing in large numbers for the fired Kmart workers. More directly, because of the sanitation struggle the community had a consciousness and infrastructure in place to support the demands of the BWFJ at Kmart. By activating the CCA and calling on the Black community to support the workers at the press conference, Rev. Walker and the Kmart workers were trying to ignite that infrastructure back in motion. Unsurprisingly, it worked, and the community expressed firm and uncompromising support for the Kmart workers.

Community members did not attend the meeting at St. Mark AME to express a one-time act of solidarity; they were ready to engage in a long-term struggle with the workers. At the meeting, the women workers went on stage to explain to the community the story behind their unjust firing and the racism they experienced in the workplace. In addition to articulating the origins of their struggle, the workers sought to communicate to the hundreds gathered at the mass meeting that the fight against Kmart had significance beyond the workplace. BWFJ at Kmart

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Rocky Mount, tobacco workers at the China American Tobacco Company voted and won a union with the Tobacco Workers International Union (TWIU-AFL). According to historian James (Jim) Wrenn, "The first pro-union vote by Chinese-American workers was followed by 26 more pro-union votes in the next two months in the North Carolina towns of Oxford, Henderson, Rocky Mount, Greenville, Wilson, Smithfield, Goldsboro, Kinston and Lumberton, and South Boston, Va." See James Wrenn, "Operation Dixie/1946 Leaf House Workers Campaign," Black Workers for Justice, February 8, 2012; Lisa Gayle Hazirjian, "Negotiating Poverty: Economic Insecurity and the Politics of Working-Class Life in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, 1929-1969" (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 2003); *"'It Wasn't Just Wages We Wanted, But Freedom": The 1946 Tobacco Leaf House Workers Organizing Campaign in Eastern North Carolina* (Tarboro, NC: Phoenix Historical Society, Inc., 2011).

[53] Hazirjian, "Negotiating Poverty: Economic Insecurity and the Politics of Working-Class Life in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, 1929-1969," 9-20, 38.

stressed that racism and unfair treatment impacted and was relevant to the larger Black community. They told the community that "the Black community is the source of over 60% of K-Marts business, however, less than 25% of the employees are Black, their refusal to meet with the unjustly fired Black workers and investigate their grievances is not only an injustice against the Black worker, but against the entire Black community."[54] Instead of approaching this issue in a narrow framework, the workers gave the community a direct way to relate to and feel connected to their struggle. During the meeting, BWFJ at Kmart informed the community of their nine demands that called for the rehiring of all fired workers with back pay, the establishing of a grievance process, end to the harassment of Black employees, access to trainings for Black workers to be in management positions, and clearing all workers from the false and made-up charges that led to their firing. For action items post-meeting, it was decided that the store would be boycotted, a petition would be circulated in support of the workers' demands, and if Kmart failed to meet with the workers and address their demands by January 20, the CAA expressed a commitment to calling for a picket of the store and continuing to advocate for a boycott.[55]

Immediately after the mass meeting, BWFJ at Kmart developed a plan and put into motion the action items that came out of the meeting. It was decided that BWFJ at Kmart needed to be strategic and position themselves to not only be prepared for a meeting with Kmart but to also build community support and momentum if Kmart refused to meet and the boycott was necessary. On January 5, another mass meeting took place at Ebenezer Baptist Church with

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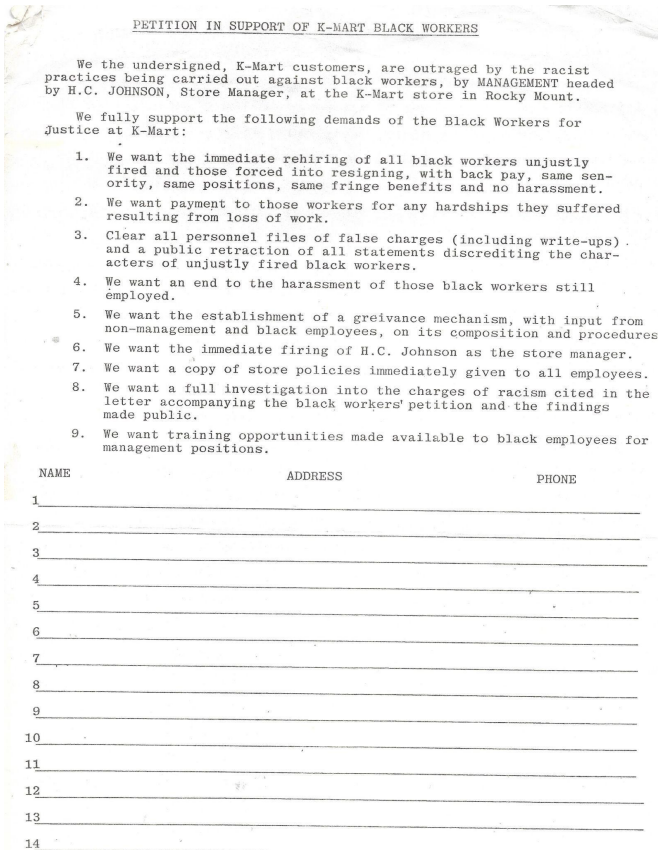
[54] "Boycott K-Mart Until Justice is Done," document in possession of author Raleigh, North Carolina; It is also likely that when the workers were articulating why their struggle was relevant to the Black community that they discussed the racism that Black customers experienced. In an article about the Kmart workers boycott, a reporter with the Nashville Graphic reported that "customers of Kmart also have complained that they are automatically suspected of being shoplifters." Two lawsuits were filed against the company by Black Kmart customers. For more on this, see Jane Plotxin, "Blacks Call for Boycott of Rocky Mount K-Mart," *The Nashville Graphic*, January 7, 1982, 1.

[55] "Kmart Executive Answers Charges," *The Evening Telegram*, December 30, 1981, 9; Muhammad, "The Kmart Struggle and Black Workers for Justice's Origins."

roughly 150 people in attendance. At this second mass meeting, the main focus was the petition campaign. Participants discussed and assigned neighborhoods and workplaces for people to concentrate on getting signatures. The BWFJ used the petition outreach plan to also prepare the community for escalated action if Kmart did not meet the workers' demands.

After the second mass meeting on January 5, two important things happened. First, Rev. Walker held a press conference two days after the mass meeting informing the public that a "boycott will remain in effect pending the outcome of a meeting with officials from Kmart's regional office."[56] Rev. Walker also made clear that "the coalition will picket the store unless Kmart complies with the requests."[57] The second thing that happened was that "there was a meeting held every Thursday to report on the number of signed petitions and the general climate of support; [and] to sign up people for the anticipated Kmart picket line."[58] The press conference and comments by Rev. Walker was important because it sent a message to the community that the workers had the full support of the city's civil rights leadership. Rev. Walkers comments also sent a message that if Kmart refuses to meet the workers' demands there will be consequences. The weekly meetings on the other hand, were important because they represented the level of organization that went into the Kmart struggle, but also the meetings were helping to build the leadership of the workers and their supporters. In other words, the workers were being leaders and active participants in their own struggle and taking ownership in the direction of their movement for justice.

[56] Plotxin, "Blacks Call for Boycott of Rocky Mount K-Mart," 1.
[57] Ibid., 8.
[58] "The Black Workers for Justice: How We Began," (Rocky Mount, NC), 3, document in possession of author.



PETITION IN SUPPORT OF K-MART BLACK WORKERS

We the undersigned, K-Mart customers, are outraged by the racist practices being carried out against black workers, by MANAGEMENT headed by H.C. JOHNSON, Store Manager, at the K-Mart store in Rocky Mount.

We fully support the following demands of the Black Workers for Justice at K-Mart:

1. We want the immediate rehiring of all black workers unjustly fired and those forced into resigning, with back pay, same seniority, same positions, same fringe benefits and no harassment.
2. We want payment to those workers for any hardships they suffered resulting from loss of work.
3. Clear all personnel files of false charges (including write-ups) and a public retraction of all statements discrediting the characters of unjustly fired black workers.
4. We want an end to the harassment of those black workers still employed.
5. We want the establishment of a greivance mechanism, with input from non-management and black employees, on its composition and procedures
6. We want the immediate firing of H.C. Johnson as the store manager.
7. We want a copy of store policies immediately given to all employees.
8. We want a full investigation into the charges of racism cited in the letter accompanying the black workers' petition and the findings made public.
9. We want training opportunities made available to black employees for management positions.

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Figure 5: Original copy of the petition supporting the Kmart workers' demands that circulated throughout the community.

The strategy that was developed out of the January 5, mass meeting and the action that followed it (especially identifying how ripe the community was for a picket) prepared the workers for a major turning point in their struggle. As expected, Kmart sent a letter canceling the scheduled meeting and made no effort to meet with the workers about their demands. By ignoring the workers, Kmart failed to meet the deadline set by BWFJ at Kmart. Consequently, on January 24, 1982, the workers and the community held a three hour picket outside of the Kmart store. The participants in the picket made clear that the "picket lines will continue until its [BWFJ at Kmart's] demands are met."[59] Representing the wide range of support the workers had

[59] Vicky Wiggins, "Group Launches Pickets," *The Evening Telegram*, January 26, 1982, 1.

gained, the picketers told reporters that they "plan to request that the Rocky Mount Ministerial Conference hold prayer vigils in front of the store in support of the workers."[60] This decision to boycott and picket the store, however, did not come without hesitation from traditional civil rights groups. Though part of the CCA, when Kmart canceled the meeting, the NAACP and the Ministerial Alliance urged the workers not to boycott. The two organizations wanted to try to convince Kmart to meet with the workers with pressure from different parts of city government. They even went as far as questioning if racism was still a problem at Kmart. The workers did not second guess themselves, when the NAACP and ministerial alliance's efforts to get a meeting with Kmart were unsuccessful, BWFJ at Kmart mobilized current employees who met with the NAACP, Ministerial Alliance, and the CCA to let them know racism was alive and well at Kmart. At the end of the meeting, the organizations that were hesitant agreed to support the pickets.

Despite an effort to interrupt or second guess the plans that had been put together by the workers and community, BWFJ at Kmart was able to maintain support from prominent community activists and leaders in Rocky Mount. Naomi Green, a long-time local activist, and leader of Nash-Edgecombe Community Advocates expressed her support for the workers. Green, who had just concluded her unsuccessful but hard- fought campaign for city council, joined the workers at some of their regularly scheduled pickets for three hours "distributing flyers" and "asking customers not to shop at Kmart."[61]

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Naomi Green ran for an at-large seat in a local electoral system that was structured in a way to maintain the white power structure and prevent Black political leadership. Green Ran in the 1981 city council election because she felt that "it is time that working class and poor people are fully represented on the council. All of my life I have worked in my community to gain fair treatment, opportunity and civil rights for all people." In addition to her commitment to the working class and welfare rights through her volunteer work with Nash-Edgecombe Community Advocates Agency, Green was also the coordinator of the Rocky Mount South Christian Leadership Conference and led a picket of a local store that was discriminating against Black employees. Green lost the at-large by only several hundred votes. For more on Green and her election campaign see "City Council Candidate Will Fight for People's

Figure 6: Christine Smith and Naomi Green preparing for a picket at the Kmart store in Rocky Mount, North Carolina.

While support from people like Rev. Walker and Naomi Green were important, the boycott and picket were not only an action that the community engaged in. Black workers themselves, who were still employed at Kmart also participated in it. Muhammad recalled that "the Kmart workers who still worked there, put all of their layaway back and got their money. Those who smoke cigarettes, stopped buying cigarettes from Kmart. They were participating in the boycott even though they were still working there."[62] The still employed Kmart workers also refused to eat in the Kmart store's cafeteria. The action from these men and women is not surprising. Since the workers went public in late December about racism at Kmart, Black workers who were still employed at the store played an important role and were active

Rights," *The Evening Telegram*, September 10, 1981, 11; Millie Buchanan, "Goff, Bridgers Set For Run-Off Election," *The Evening Telegram*, October 7, 1981, 13; "SCLC Pickets Store, Charges Harassment," *The Evening Telegram,* April 4, 1978, 9; Plotkin, "Black Plan Picket Line at Rocky Mount Kmart," 1. Later in 1982, she ran for Edgecombe County Commissioner, see Richard Whiting, "Edgecombe Commissioner Race is Popular One," *The Evening Telegram*, May 25, 1982, 7.

[62] Muhammad, "The Kmart Struggle and Black Workers for Justice's Origins."

participants in the fightback being waged by BWFJ at Kmart. Early on, it was decided that the only visible people in the organization would be Davis, Muhammad and the other two fired workers. Yet, these individuals were not the only participants and decision makers. BWFJ at Kmart's boycott and pickets gained so much traction in Rocky Mount and impacted the store that Black workers still employed at Kmart were being pressured and regularly asked about their affiliation with BWFJ at Kmart.[63]

The Impact of BWFJ at Kmart on Rocky Mount's Black Working Class

While the boycott and struggle of the Kmart workers targeted the Kmart store, their workplace and community resistance was felt throughout the entire city. During one of BWFJ at Kmart's pickets, Muhmmad remembers the husband of one of the workers driving up and telling his wife, "you better get your behind home because you're going to get me fired." The husband did not work at Kmart, he worked at Abbots, a medical parts manufacturing plant. According to Muhammad, the husband's supervisor told him "you need to get your wife straightened out, she's out there [causing trouble]." The worker, who felt like her husband had unnecessarily insulted her, stood her ground, and told him "Look! I contribute to this house too" and remained on the picket line.[64]

Though Muhammad did not agree with how the husband treated his wife, their encounter was another demonstration of the impact and success of the Kmart struggle. For Muhammad, if the Kmart struggle was at the center of attention and being discussed by management and workers at different workplaces, that was not a bad thing. In fact, it was welcomed. In addition to the boycott, petition, and pickets, there was another strategy that unfolded during the workers

[63] "Kmart Officials Answer Charges," *The Evening Telegram*, January 8, 1982, 7.
[64] Muhammad, "The Kmart Struggle and Black Workers for Justice's Origins."

fight against Kmart. Since the beginning of the struggle, Muhammad "saw this opportunity to build support [for the Kmart workers] as also an opportunity to begin to target and concentrate at other workplaces so that a more working-class movement building character is being brought to this struggle." In other words, the Kmart struggle was not just about Kmart and achieving justice for the workers, Muhammad saw it as an opportunity to build a strong workers movement in the Eastern part of the state. In his widely read *Playbook for Progressive: 16 Qualities of the Successful Organizer*, longtime activist Eric Mann argues that "throughout the [Kmart] campaign, Saladin Muhammad was a lead organizer and tireless foot solider."[65] While most people went to the churches and neighborhoods, Muhammad would regularly wake up at 5:00am and take the petition to different workplaces throughout Rocky Mount. He went to city workers, sanitation workers, park and recreation workers, and workers in the private sector seeking support for the Kmart struggle. His wife, Naeema, worked at one of the largest textile mills in Rocky Mount as a grader and got petition signatures signed there too. The larger working class view was such a key part of the struggle that the mass meetings "attracted [and encouraged the participation of] other black workers" and allowed them the opportunity to talk "about problems at their workplace."[66] When Muhammad went to go talk to other workers about the petition and boycott of Kmart, he wanted them to understand the Kmart workers as interconnected with their struggles and to fight back together, not in isolation from each other. He was expressing to them that together; they are stronger and can achieve changes for not only one workplace but other workplaces nearby.

[65] Eric Mann, *Playbook for Progressives: 16 Qualities of the Successful Organizer* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011). 9.
[66] "The Black Workers for Justice: How We Began," 15.

BWFJ at Kmart adopting diverse tactics and prompting a working class and community perspective proved to be successful. Although the Kmart corporation sought to undermine the impact of BWFJ at Kmart's various forms of direct action and told local press that the organization of workers did not have "the authority to make demands on the store," by February 8, the workers had won a major victory.[67] According to *The Evening Telegram*, H.C. Johnson was transferred to a South Carolina store, achieving the workers' demands that H.C. Johnson be fired or removed as story manager.[68] Further, a Black worker was added to the management team of Rocky Mount's Kmart store. In response to these victories, BWFJ at Kmart's spokesperson Mildred Davis maintained that "the black workers for justice know that the K-Mart Corporation did not make these changes in good faith." She continued, "the cutting or loss of the Black customer's dollars, the stay home boycott which went into effect December 20, 1981, and the picketing of the Rocky Mount K-Mart store is what brought this change in management at the K-Mart Rocky Mount."[69] Davis also stressed that "the workers know that this same means of power will bring about the other demands." In other words, the struggle against Kmart was not over yet and Davis and her comrades had more fight in them.

After winning two major victories, BWFJ at Kmart's commitment to keep their struggle going put them into a new phase of struggle. Shortly after the news about changes in management, BWFJ at Kmart gained the support of the youth in Rocky Mount. The children of BWFJ at Kmart members mobilized their friends and formed the Black Youth Coalition. Through the Black Youth Coalition, the young people concentrated most of their organizational

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[67] "Kmart Officials Answer Charges," 7; To undermine the workers' fight back, representatives from Kmart told the press that based on their visits to the store and talking to workers, no racism existed. They maintained that Black and white workers are treated fairly. See "Kmart Executive Answers Charges," 9.

[68] Vicki Wiggins, "K-Mart Transfers Manager To South Carolina Store," *The Evening Telegram*, February 8, 1982.

[69] Mildred Davis to Gordon (Ajamu) Dillahunt, February 13, 1982, letter in possession of author, Raleigh, North Carolina.

activities on supporting the Kmart struggle and were "the most reliable forces in showing up for the picket lines." Moreover, "they took the Kmart issues to the schools and neighborhood recreation and sports location."[70] With the help of Rocky Mount's youth, BWFJ at Kmart gained another win when "write-ups under H.C. Johnson" were "removed from their files by the new management."[71] Again, after a third demand was met, the workers did not let up. BWFJ at Kmart organized a "boycott" motorcade with about 16 cars riding through African American neighborhoods.

From a Local Struggle to a Statewide Struggle

Muhammad's political experience within RAM and the APP allowed him to not only recognize that BWFJ at Kmart's struggle had a statewide and regional character, but his organizational experiences also put him in a position to be able to act on it. During the Kmart struggle, "Trips were taken to meetings, rallies and conferences in Atlanta, Ga., Raleigh, N.C., Hamilton, N.C., Warsaw, N.C. and Greensboro, N.C. Support activities occurred in Philadelphia, Atlanta and Raleigh."[72]

Of all these locations that Muhammad went to for the Kmart struggle, Raleigh was the most important and long-term. Prior to his arrival in Rocky Mount, Muhammad attended the 1980 National Black United Front Conference in New York. At the conference, he met and exchanged contact information with activists from North Carolina. When the Kmart struggle was taking place and it was decided a statewide strategy was necessary, Muhammad reached out to the contacts he made at the Black United Front Conference for support. He was invited to a meeting of the Raleigh Chapter of the Black United Front (RBUF) where he discussed the Kmart

[70] "The Black Workers for Justice: How We Began," 8.
[71] Ibid., 5.
[72] "The Black Workers for Justice: How We Began," 6.

struggle and the support needed to carry it forward. While at the RBUF meeting he met Ajamu and Rukiya Dillahunt, Jim Grant, Anagaza Laughinghouse, and Jonathan Williams (the son of Robert F. Williams). Muhammad's presence at the meeting resulted in the RBUF agreeing to support the boycott and organizing two pickets in Raleigh that showed support for the Kmart workers in Rocky Mount. When Muhammad went to the RBUF meeting, the local chapter had been active in the Raleigh community fighting against police brutality and demanding the formation of a civilian review board. The RBUF was truly a united front and represented different political perspectives and identities in the Black community; as part of its membership, they had clergy, postal workers, manufacturing workers, teachers, legal workers, and other professionals. Despite having its hands full in its fight against the police and city council, the RBUF incorporated Kmart solidarity as part of its organizing activities and supported the struggle all the way to the end.

In March of 1982, the RBUF and the Greensboro Chapter of the Black United Front organized a statewide Grassroots Organizing and Educational Conference. In his effort to make the case for why a statewide conference was necessary, Angaza Laughinghouse, a recent law-school graduate from Rutgers University and a member of the RBUF asserted that "All over the state, masses of Blacks are searching for or developing a vehicle to fight back against their oppression."[73] While the resistance across the state was important, Laughinghouse maintained that the resistance remained local in its orientation and outlook. This local character led him to further argue that "The local motion is good, but it is limited by its isolation both regionally and politically from the broader scoop of what is at the root of our national oppression."[74] In other

[73] Angaza Laughinghouse, *Proposal for a Grassroots Conference* (Raleigh, NC, 1981), 2.
[74] Ibid., 3.

words, with the local culture of resistance emerging in North Carolina during the 1980s, Laughinghouse stressed that "The Isolated Fight Back Motion Must Become part of a Conscious Black Liberation Movement."[75] In his view, the RBUF and Greensboro BUF had the potential to bring the local struggles out of isolation and be part of a larger movement for Black liberation. The conference program was structured in a manner that addressed the isolation issue and covered a diversity of topics related to the southern Black experience and freedom struggle. There were workshops and panel discussions on youth and education, Jim Crow and racist violence, public housing and budget cuts, anti-draft, and self-government. For the workshop on "The Black Worker and Job Discrimination" Mildred Davis and Christine Smith were workshop leaders. For the assembly wide sessions that all participants attended, Saladin Muhammad was on the panel for two workshops as a representative for Black Workers Justice at Kmart; those panels were "The Importance of Collective Leadership and Democracy" and "Organizing and Mobilizing Your Group and Community." There was another Assembly wide workshop on communications that a representative from BWFJ at Kmart was on. The presence of a BWFJ at Kmart representative on numerous panels was a sign that its struggle was inspiring and a clear representation of the direction the Black liberation movement should be headed.

[75] Ibid., 2.

Figure 7: Saladin Muhammad speaking at the NC Grassroots Conference. Photo Source, The Fruit of Labor World Cultural Center.

Figure 8: Photo of participants at the NC Grassroots Conference. Photo Source: The Fruit of Labor World Culture Center.

Muhammad's decision to take the Kmart struggle to the RBUF led to more than just the RBUF supporting the boycott, organizing two pickets, and including them in the Grassroots Conference; his attendance at the RBUF meeting connected like-minded activists who would develop an auspicious and long-term political relationship. Mildred Davis, the spokesperson for BWFJ at Kmart recognized early on the potential for a long-term relationship among the activists who connected at the RBUF meeting. In a letter addressed to Gordon (Ajamu) Dillahunt, Davis wrote that:

> Young men such as yourself and others working with you, give extra strength to our struggle knowing that support and efforts are being done by such persons, as yourself. As a Black person, I admire and respect such person, as all of you. I retained the articles and for many years to come, no matter what the outcome of the struggle of the black workers for justice, I personally will never forget the many efforts and support put forth by you and others who worked with you such as Mr. A Laughinghouse and Mr. P. White [Saladin Muhammad]. All of you are outstanding young Black men. You have within you the true gift of love, kindness, compassion, and a willingness to listen, work for justice, and support your people.[76]

For the remainder of the 1980s and into the twenty-first century, the love, kindness, support, and commitment to justice expressed by these three men and their families would benefit Black workers and all workers across the state of North Carolina and southern region. The Kmart struggle helped bring together a political force that transformed and brought new energy to the state's social movement and struggle to organize the unorganized for long term revolutionary change.

Indeed, the Kmart struggle and the community and worker empowerment it engendered is part of and cannot be divorced from the tradition of Black worker resistance in Rocky Mount. At the same time, the worker tradition in Rocky Mount alone does not fully capture the

[76] Mildred Davis to Gordon Dillahunt, letter in possession of author, Raleigh, North Carolina.

breakthrough of the Kmart struggle and its impact on the city's working class. The community support that took place around the Kmart workers has direct roots to the community support that emerged for the sanitation workers three years prior. To some degree, the Kmart workers having the confidence to fight against injustices on the job has its roots in the sanitation workers strike, but not completely. On its own, the Kmart struggle brought a new methodology and organizational perspective that was not at the center of past workers struggles in the city. That is, the Kmart struggle is not only part of a local tradition of struggle, but there are also other important factors that played a part in the trajectory of BWFJ at Kmart being formed. The Kmart struggle, then, emerged when it did for multiple reasons and the commitment of the Black women workers, the experience of Saladin Muhammad, and the history of worker resistance are a few of them.

In addition to having multiple factors that led to its origins, the Kmart struggle is also significant and unique because of the time period in which it emerged. The Kmart struggle unfolded during the Reagan administration and a time when workers and organized labor were under attack. But it also unfolded in a state and region that had just been in national and international spotlight for the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, where 5 Communist Workers Party (CWP) members in Greensboro, North Carolina were shot and killed by the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi Party with the cooperation from the Greensboro Police Department. Those who were killed during the massacre were also textile workers and active participants in the state's labor movement.[77] Years later, Angaza Laughinghouse recalled that the Greensboro Massacre "put an

[77] According to journalist Elizabeth Wheaton "the widows and survivors–proclaimed that the government attacked their North Carolina leadership in order to thwart their highly successful labor organizing. They point to the Carolina Brown Lung Association, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers locals at Cone Mills, and AFSCME Local 77 at Duke Hospital as examples of the importance of the organizing work they were involved in from 1974 to 1979. That they put enormous, almost superhuman, amounts of time, energy, and thought into those organizing drives is not in question." Jim Wrenn stressed that through its Trade Union Education League, the CWP

unbelievable chill on all the organizing in the entire region."[78] Moreover, Jim Wrenn, an active member of the CWP who was shot during the Massacre maintained that the period post-massacre "unleashed a period of intense anti-union and anti-communist attacks on labor [in North Carolina]."[79] It was the Kmart struggle in 1981, however, that helped break that chill, fought against the anti-worker rhetoric of the period, and inspired workers in Rocky Mount and Eastern North Carolina to take action. Still, the tragedy in Greensboro stayed on the minds of Black workers throughout the state for years to come. Saladin Muhammad remembered that early on in BWFJ's history, they "found themselves in many cases having to answer the question 'are y'all connected to this CWP group?'" In response that that, Muhammad stressed that "we had a position that we weren't going to be redbaiting or downing them at all." Muhammad and others would respond to the questions about the CWP by simply saying, "no we are not connected to them, but this is what we stand for."[80]

In sum, as a result of this important Black workers struggle in 1981 at Kmart, a new wave of Black worker empowerment, consciousness, and leadership was born.

"was on the verge of launching an independent, progressive rank-and-file textile workers union in North Carolina." See Elizabeth Wheaton, *Codename Greenkil: The 1979 Greensboro Killings* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 49.

[78] Angaza Laughinghouse, interviewed by Marcus Montaño and Lauren Gerald, March 6, 2014.

[79] Dante Strobino, "40th anniversary of Greensboro Massacre provides lessons for today's movement," *Workers World*, November 10, 2019.

[80] Saladin Muhammad, "The Role of the Church and the CWP," April 9, 2021, interviewed by Ajamu Dillahunt, recording in possession of the author, Raleigh, NC.

CHAPTER TWO: Fremont, Voting Rights, and Building Black Workers for Justice

If unions are going to survive and be successful in building a vibrant labor movement in the '70s and '80s, they must integrate their efforts with those of the entire black community…Plainly speaking, the future of organized labor in the South will hinge on the fortunes of the black worker.[81]

Jim Grant, 1976

We, the Black Workers for Justice, are fully convinced by the many events of history, that the masses of black people have deeply rooted in our hearts, minds and souls a burning desire to have power over our lives in order to gain FREEDOM. The black working class must be organized as the main basis of that power…. A well organized black workers organization, with a correct program, will enable the black working class to become a major force for unifying all workers into a conscious labor movement and at the same time maintain its own identity as a leading force struggling for the day to day needs and liberation of black people as a whole.[82]

Black Workers for Justice, 1982

In March of 1982, the Kmart struggle had reached its final stage. Though the workers did not get their jobs back or win all nine of their demands, they still waged a successful organizing campaign. BWFJ at Kmart got the store manager removed, a Black person was put on the management team, and workers who had been written-up under H.C. Johnson's management got their files cleared of all write ups. Getting these demands met, however, was not the only reason the campaign was successful. BWFJ at Kmart built the foundation for future Black worker organizing in Eastern North Carolina. During the campaign, BWFJ at Kmart skillfully connected their struggle to other Black workers in the surrounding area and stressed to the community that "a victory for the K-mart workers would be a battle won in the interest of all black workers in Rocky Mount."[83] This framing resonated with other workers. At BWFJ at Kmart's mass meetings, workers in Rocky Mount attended the meetings to support the Kmart workers, but to

[81] Jim Grant, "The Organized Unorganized," *Southern Exposure*, 1976, 135.
[82] "Black Workers for Justice's Organizing Program," 4, document in possession of author, Raleigh, North Carolina.
[83] "The Black Workers for Justice: How We Began," 4.

also “speak-out” about the mistreatment and exploitation they were experiencing at their workplace. The decision to broaden out BWFJ at Kmart’s focus and connect the issues they were facing to the struggles of other Black workers proved to be an important long-term and empowering strategy.

Toward the end of March 1982, disagreements and internal conflicts had taken over the CCA and made continuing the boycott of Kmart impossible. Some groups in the CCA believed that Kmart workers would not win any other demands and that the boycott had the potential to negatively impact the upcoming city and county elections for Black candidates. When key organizations in the CCA decided to end their participation in the coalition, it “undermined the support of the K-mart struggle and boycott.” At the time of the infighting, another reason momentum was lost was because there was a “very low level of organizational development, experience and discipline of the BWFJ at Kmart.”[84] That is, it was difficult to get some workers to see the long-term necessity of continuing to be organized. Despite referencing and exposing workers to the history of Black worker leadership and resistance, Muhammad and others were unable to spark the urgency or consistency necessary for the struggle to continue in a meaningful way.

By April 1982, BWFJ at Kmart decided to drop Kmart from its name and shift its focus from Kmart to building a permanent Black workers' organization. This organization of Black workers would position itself to respond to the concerns and problems of workers who were experiencing racism and unjust working conditions in different industries throughout Eastern North Carolina. It is important to note that Black workers in Eastern North Carolina had a history of union activity but with the Greensboro Massacre, Reagan's attack on labor and the gains made

[84] Ibid., 6.

by the civil rights movement, Black workers organizing reached the point of inactivity and their political participation and struggles on the shop floor needed to be revitalized. Identifying as just Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ), the newly formed but loosely structured organization concentrated most of its organizational energy on actively recruiting, reactivating, and building a base of Black workers and community members. Having developed the reputation as the "Kmart man," Saladin Muhammad traveled around the eastern part of the state recruiting for and spreading the word about BWFJ. On May 24, 1982, Muhammad gave a speech to the Duplin County Concern Citizens (DCCC) introducing the work and perspective of BWFJ. In his presentation, he addressed the issues of organization, mobilization, education, and unity. More importantly, he highlighted what BWFJ was trying to build and the philosophy guiding the young organization's quest to achieve social change. Muhammad voiced to the DCCC that "Black workers are the backbone of any struggle. If they don't work it is the bosses, towns and the county governments that will suffer. If they refuse to spend their dollar then the businesses will suffer."[85] For Muhammad, this powerful position of the Black worker "must be used to strengthen the struggle of Black People." Muhammad closed out his speech to the DCCC urging them to keep fighting and "not be afraid of making mistakes" because "everything will not go according to plan but you can't give up if you expect to win."[86]

This chapter explores the formative years of BWFJ and its second major organizing campaign at Hardwood Dimensions Mill in Fremont, North Carolina. Beyond the workplace organizing at the sawmill, this chapter unpacks the role of the Fremont struggle in the development of BWFJ as a statewide, but Eastern North Carolina focused organization. An

[85] Saladin Muhammad to Duplin County Concerned Citizens (Duplin County, NC, 1982), 2.
[86] Ibid.

important workplace and community struggle, the work in Fremont laid the foundation for the BWFJ sponsored Workers: Know Your Rights Conference on December 11, 1982, that brought together close to one-hundred workers and community leaders from across the state. The conference, which served as BWFJ's founding assembly, passed resolutions that provided clear next steps and an organizing program for Black workers. As a result of the momentum generated at the conference, BWFJ decided to oppose workfare, form workplace committees, become plaintiffs in a voting rights lawsuit that challenged the white supremacist at-large voting system in Rocky Mount, and fight for Black political power in Fremont. During this early period of BWFJ's history, a large majority of its activities took place in Eastern North Carolina but maintained ongoing support in Raleigh where Black workers were also in motion and organizing in the workplace. By 1985, the organizing and workplace struggles in Raleigh would fully merge into the organizational structure of Black Workers for Justice.

In this chapter, as I tell the story of the workers at the Hardwood Dimensions Mill and the call for the Workers: Know Your Rights Conference in Fremont, I continue to capture the organizing skills and leadership of Saladin Muhammad, but I also introduce other key BWFJ leaders into the story. For the Workers: Know Your Rights Conference and the workers it mobilized, I examine the central role of Jim Grant's history and reputation, and the organizing skills of Angaza Laughinghouse. On top of that, I examine why BWFJ as an organization thought concentrating its activities on Black workers in Eastern North Carolina (the Black Belt region of the state) was indispensable to building a successful Black liberation movement in the 1980s. That is, I bring to the surface BWFJ's theory of change and focus on the organization's successes and failures of trying to put its theory into practice. Beyond the workplace, BWFJ engraved into its organizing philosophy a commitment to building worker power in the

workplace and in the community. Thus, I concentrate on BWFJ's early work fighting for voting rights and political power in both Rocky Mount and Fremont. The engagement with fight against voter suppression and for political power was developed and encouraged by BWFJ's founder member and mentor Abner Berry. Following a deep dive into BWFJ's workplace and community roots in Eastern North Carolina, I explore the history and origins of its organizing activities in Raleigh. For this part of the story, I introduce the leadership of Ajamu and Rukiya Dillahunt.

This chapter is exploring BWFJ's history from 1982-1984. In this small window of time, BWFJ engaged in a range of activities that would shape how it consolidated and transformed itself in 1985 (the focus of chapter 3) to be a stronger, more disciplined, and effective organization. The first few years of organizational building are the most difficult. BWFJ was not exempt from those difficulties. This early period of activities laid the foundation for BWFJ to be an uncompromising political force in a time when leadership and organization was desperately needed in North Carolina and South.

"Watch Out Mill, Change Gonna Come": Fremont, Hardwood Dimension Mill, and the Fair Labor Support Committee

In March 1982, Saladin Muhammad, and his wife, Naeema Muhammad received a visit from her cousin Fred who worked in the neighboring town of Fremont. Fred informed the Muhammads that his employer, the Hardwood Dimensions Company cut the workers' pay by 10%. Visibly frustrated and eager to do something about it, Fred heard about what the Kmart workers were able to accomplish and asked the Muhammads if they would be willing to help the workers at the Mill fight the unjust pay cuts and working conditions. Saladin Muhammad took the request from his cousin to the next BWFJ meeting where it was decided that Muhammad would meet with the workers and the *Justice Speaks* newsletter "would be used to help workers

at the Mill to understand how to begin struggling against these problems."[87] It is important to note that at the time of the Fremont request, BWFJ had maintained the involvement of a small number of Kmart workers and were in the early stage of organizing sanitation workers in Rocky Mount. That is, the decision to aid the organizing of the workers at the Hardwood Dimensions Mill was not an individual decision from Muhammad, it was done so with the input of Black workers from different workplaces in Rocky Mount.

Once approval had been given from BWFJ, Muhammad was ready to get to work. His cousin not only worked in the plant, but to make extra money, he did security at night. Using his cousin's privileges as a security guard, Muhammad went to visit Hardwood Dimensions to get a better understanding of the working conditions and to start "building a case against the company."[88] To help with his investigation, Muhammad invited Ajamu Dillahunt, a leader in the Raleigh Black United Front. Dillahunt, who was an active supporter of the Kmart workers, was asked to take pictures of the Mill that would potentially be used to aid the workers' cause. Muhammad recalled that "the conditions were real bad" in the plant. When he and Dillahunt went inside, they were taken on an overhead catwalk frequently used by workers. The catwalk was so dated, it could have collapsed at any moment. In a joking but still somewhat serious tone, Dillahunt told Muhammad on the catwalk "[i know] we are prepared to die [for the cause], but not in this place." The Mill, Dillahunt argued, "wasn't a site for dying in the struggle."[89] Clearly, the conditions were bad in the plant. With his camera Dillahunt captured what the workers experienced on the day-to-day and put it in a slideshow titled "Watchout Mill, Change Gonna

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[87] "The Black Workers for Justice: How We Began," 8.

[88] Saladin Muhammad, "Kmart, Fremont, and Abner Berry," June 29, 2021, interviewed by Ajamu Dillahunt, recording in possession of the author, Raleigh, NC.

[89] Ajamu Dillahunt (the author's grandfather), "BWFJ Group Oral History 2," August 3, 2019, interviewed by Ajamu Dillahunt, recording in possession of the author, Raleigh, NC.

Come!" The slide show was used to build support for the workers' struggling for justice at the Mill. The phrase "Watchout Mill, Change Gonna Come!" became a rallying cry for the struggle that would unfold in Fremont.

Figure 9: Saladin Muhammad and his cousin Fred inside of the Hardwood Dimensions Mill in Fremont, North Carolina in 1982. Photo by Ajamu Dillahunt (the author's grandfather).

A small town located in Eastern North Carolina; Fremont is about twenty miles from Rocky Mount. According to the 1980 census, Fremont had a population of less than 2,000 people. Of its roughly 2,000 residents, a little over 40% were African American. Though they were nearly half the population, Fremont had never had any Black elected officials. The African American population of Fremont not only suffered from a lack of political power, but they were also mistreated on the job. The Hardwood Dimensions Mill, a major employer in town, had been in the area for close to thirty years and had a workforce that was 95% Black. When the company decided to cut the wages of workers by 10%, that was only a small portion of the widespread mistreatment workers experienced at the Mill. In *Justice Speaks*, BWFJ described the working

conditions in the mill as being "a form of slavery."[90] They noted that "the workers must inhale a lot of sawdust, because the mill has no ventilation system; the mill has poor lighting; and the equipment is unsafe and outdated."[91] In addition to not having ventilation, proper lighting, and up-to-date equipment, the majority of the workers at the Mill made less than $4.00 an hour, they did not have paid vacation or sick days, a grievance system, a retirement or pension plan, or quality health insurance.[92] On some occasion the workers would have unexplained deductions from their check. While the 10% pay cut sparked Fred to want to take action, the fight at Hardwood Dimensions Mill was not only about wages, but also better working conditions and respect on the job.

Shortly after Muhammad and Dillahunt went to the Mill to take pictures, BWFJ began the process of building a workplace committee at the Mill. Similar to the Kmart struggle, BWFJ sought to empower the workers to be leaders in their own struggle. In conjunction with building workers leadership, BWFJ stressed the need for building community support early in the struggle. BWFJ believed that without a strong community support base, the struggle at the Mill would not gain the necessary momentum it needed to be victorious. Until strong leadership was built in the Mill and community support seemed possible, the first few months of organizing Mill workers was not publicly broadcasted. Having this foundation was important because like most places in NC at that time, workers at Hardwood Dimensions Mill did not have a history of worker resistance or workers collectively organizing. Thus, the organizing of the workers could not take the traditional route of just simply focusing on the workplace. To further connect with workers, BWFJ began to do outreach at local churches that had members employed at the Mill.

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[90] "Watch Out Mill! Change Gonna Come!" *Justice Speaks*, 1982, 1.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid., 2.

As a result of this outreach, Muhammad was invited to speak at the First Missionary Baptist Church that was located right across the street from the sawmill. Muhammad gave a speech titled "The Black Child Who Stood by the Door" that discussed the importance of unions and workers having rights on the job. After he finished, a man named Billy Harvey got on one knee and started praying. In his prayer, Harvey uplifted unions and expressed his support for Muhammad's remarks. Harvey had been the president of the local Communication Workers of America (CWA) chapter in Smithfield, North Carolina. He brought his political and union experience from Smithfield with him to the struggle in Fremont and became one of the main leaders against the Hardwood Dimensions Mill.

Figure 10: A photo taken inside of the plant that demonstrated the unstableness of the ventilation system and conditions in the Mill. Photo by Ajamu Dillahunt.

Two months after contact was established with workers in Fremont, the workplace organizing that BWFJ helped initiate started to gain momentum. With workers showing a high level of commitment to fighting for better wages and working conditions, it was decided that the workers struggle had the potential to conduct a successful union drive. When BWFJ reached out

to the Carpenters Union, the union responded by sending one of its organizers to Fremont. Because of the groundwork done by BWFJ, the union was able to set up an office at the First Missionary Baptist Church.

Around the time the union was called in, the movement in Fremont started to focus on increasing public awareness and support for the workers' cause. Angaza Laughinghouse, who was active in the RBUF, helping to build the BWFJ, and employed at Farmworker Legal Services in Eastern North Carolina, suggested the forming of the Fair Labor Support Committee (FLSC). Laughinghouse proposed the FLSC be formed to ensure the union organizing and the community support efforts were intimately linked and part of the same strategy. As a way to build the community portion of the FLSC, in August of 1982, under the leadership of Laughinghouse, "25 members and supporters of The Black Workers For Justice from five different towns and cities, came to Fremont for a door to door campaign, calling on the community to build a movement to help the workers gain strength in their struggle at the mill."[93] During their door-to-door campaign, BWFJ gave the residents of Fremont a letter titled, "Open Letter to the Fremont Community: All Workers Need A Union." In the letter, BWFJ not only urged the community to support the workers because the conditions in the plant were unjust, but they also urged the community to support the workers because their wage cut had a direct impact on the larger Fremont community. BWFJ wrote to the people of Fremont that "the mill workers are very important to the economic life of your community." It was expressed that the wages earned by the workers went toward "food, clothing, housing, medical needs, church offers." To make it even more real for the community, BWFJ calculated that "The [10%] pay cut reduced each worker's pay by about $65.00 a month, totaling a loss of about $3,000 a month to the

[93] Ibid., 3.

community."[94] BWFJ concluded the one-page letter by explaining the importance of a union. The organization asserted that "a union would help in making the company more accountable to the needs of the community."[95] The letter also made it clear that the community had a role in making a union victory possible. It was recommended that the community join the FLSC and help "defend the efforts of the workers inside the Mill" by joining the FLSC to "organize labor education drives, do fundraising, hold rallies and demonstrations when necessary, help get union cards signed and have lawyers available for legal defense."[96]

Having only been in Fremont for about five months, BWFJ's organizing methodology was helping lead to positive changes for the workers in the small town. Not long after the door-to-door effort and encouraging the community's participation in the FLSC, the Hardwood Dimension Company reversed the 10% pay cut. The organizing had worked and BWFJ's organizing methodology helped the workers achieve a major victory. For BWFJ, the worker and community victory at the Mill served as the foundation of building a statewide worker's movement rooted in Eastern North Carolina.

Workers: Know Your Rights Conference and Why a Black Workers Organization

At the time of the Fremont struggle, Saladin Muhammad, Angaza Laughinghouse, and Jim Grant worked at legal service offices in Eastern North Carolina. As legal service employees, they would often come in contact with community members who would "come to legal services thinking [their problems] were legal issues." Muhammad, Laughinghouse, and Grant knew that the issues they were facing went beyond the scoop of legal action. Muhammad emphasized that "what some of us did was talk to them about the political issues" and encouraged them to fight

[94] "Open Letter to the Fremont Community: All Workers Need a Union," (Black Workers for Justice, 1982), document in possession of author.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.

their issues through organizing.[97] The problems that were brought to legal services did not just impact people in one county, city, or town, these were issues that were widespread throughout the entire eastern part of the state. Based on their work with legal services, Muhammad, Laughinghouse, and Grant maintained that "the working poor in Eastern, N.C. have very few resources to help them fight against job related problems." The working poor, they surmised, faced "issues like, race, sex and age discrimination; unsafe working conditions; firings because of union activities; wages and hours; unemployment compensation; and workers compensation are often won by employers because many workers are not aware of their legal rights or the various ways of fighting back on the job."[98] On top of not having the tools to challenge problems on the job, "because of the rural nature of Eastern, N.C. the working poor find themselves isolated from each other and are unable to share their common experiences as a way of helping them to find some answers in addressing their problems."[99] The three men reached this conclusion not from a place of assumptions, personal opinions, or overly theoretical viewpoint, they saw the crisis and needs of Black workers first-hand and on a daily basis. In fact, the three men were most qualified to make this assessment of Black workers. As workers for legal services in Wilson and Newton Groove, they did work with and helped lead cases that involved farmworkers, poultry workers, garment workers, and workers from various industries.

The assessment that was made about workers in Eastern North Carolina was not just lip service or just a simple observation, the three men helped do something about it. Through their work as legal service employees and their belief that Black workers needed to be organized, the three men decided to address the lack of knowledge among the working poor in Eastern, NC by

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[97] Saladin Muhammad, "BWFJ Group Oral History 2," August 3, 2019, interviewed by Ajamu Dillahunt, recording in possession of the author, Raleigh, NC.
[98] Workers Know Your Rights Conference," document in possession of author.
[99] Ibid.

organizing the Workers: Know Your Rights Conference. The purpose of the conference was to make "the working poor aware of their legal rights, as well as to bring them together to learn from each other." Since the workers at Hardwood Dimension Mill had been waging a noteworthy struggle, Fremont was the ideal location to host the conference. The FLSC had been organizing "open meetings…at a local church," leading leaflet distribution "at the mill and in the community," encouraging workers to play an active role in their own struggle and mobilizing workers from other workplaces to support the workers at the Mill. What was being built in Fremont is what BWFJ hoped could happen in other parts of Eastern, NC where workers were mistreated and prevented from expressing any form of power or self-determination.

Supported by over a dozen churches, community organizations, and Black institutions, BWFJ and the FLSC convened the Workers: Know Your Rights Conference on December 11, 1982, at the First Missionary Baptist Church in Fremont, North Carolina with close to one-hundred workers and community leaders present.[100] The close to one hundred people in attendance at the conference was made possible because of the contacts and relationships built by Jim Grant. Grant, a then-employee of Farmworker Legal Services located in Newton Groove, North Carolina, not only had key relationships with different communities through his job, but he also had a history of organizing Black workers in the South. In 1968, after obtaining his Ph.D. in Chemistry from Pennsylvania State University, Grant moved to Charlotte, North Carolina as a part of the anti-poverty Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program. Because of his

[100] Supporting organizations were: Holy Temple Free Will Baptist Church (Fremont), Lillie of the Valley Church, First Baptist Church (Fremont), Ebenezer Baptist Church (Rocky Mount), Union Grove (Fremont), Blooming Hill Community Association (Whitakers), Hook Grove Church, Quick Snack Grill, Wooten Music, Quick Sales, Lucille's Beauty Shop (Fremont), Friendly Family Club (Fremont), College Park Area Organizing Committee for Justice, Hamilton Houses Improvement Association, Johnston County Workers Committee, Duplin County Concerned Citizens, North Carolina Association of Black Workers, Robersonville Community Organization, Raleigh Black United Front, and Women in the Work Force/Job Break Through/American Friends Service.

strong anti-war position, his time with the VISTA program was short-lived. As a committed activist and revolutionary, he decided to stay in North Carolina and started working as an organizer for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the western part of the state. While organizing with SCLC, Grant participated in and helped organize Black hospital workers in Charleston, South Carolina (1969) and a Black sanitation workers strike in Charlotte, North Carolina (1970).[101]

Shortly after these important Black worker struggles, Grant was arrested in 1971 and sentenced in 1972 to 25 years in prison. He and two others were accused of blowing up the segregated Lazy B horse stable in Charlotte. Between 1971-1973, Grant was first incarcerated in Charlotte and later transferred to a prison in Atlanta. His mentality in prison "was that you try and organize wherever you happen to be."[102] While imprisoned in Charlotte, "He filed a lawsuit against Mecklenburg County because of poor conditions and food quality." Once in Atlanta, he "set up a chapter of the NAACP…and worked to mobilize fellow inmates through liberation theology."[103] By 1974, he was transferred to Central Prison in Raleigh where "he held a hunger strike with Ben Chavis, leader of the Wilmington Ten, to protest poor food and prison labor policies."[104] It was in Central Prison that Grant joined and organized with the North Carolina Prisoners' Labor Union. The union organized for the right to collectively bargain, better wages, and changes to the grievance process.

In addition to the organizing he did in prison, Grant also maintained his work as a journalist. Throughout the entirety of his incarceration, he was on staff as a writer for the

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[101] Jim Grant, oral history interview by Josh Davis, July 29, 2014, Southern Oral History Program, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Also see, Grant, "The Organized Unorganized."
[102] Jim Grant, oral history interview by Jonathan Michels, January 2018, *Scalawag Magazine*, Durham, North Carolina.
[103] Grant, oral history interview by Josh Davis, July 29, 2014.
[104] Ibid.

Southern Conference Educational Fund. In 1976, he wrote an article titled "The Organized Unorganized," that stressed the importance of the Black community in the southern labor movement. Using the Charleston and Charlotte workers struggle that he was involved in as an example, Grant argued that when unions come south no matter how well resourced, they usually "pale" because "their agenda appears narrow and compromising of larger concerns [of the Black community]." According to Grant, "Black people have a cohesiveness and closeness in relating community oppression in both spheres of their lives." It was Grant's thinking that "to succeed, unions must appreciate this fact; labor drives must demonstrate to the black community that its struggle is labor's struggle, and that labor's demands relate to and can mobilize the community."[105]

Grant understood the power and necessity of organizing the Black worker. During Jim Hunt's governorship in 1979, Grant was pardoned and released from prison. Once released, he wasted no time and started working for Farm Worker Legal Services under the directorship of Steve Edelstein. While there, he recruited Angaza Laughinghouse to work with him. Before being hired by legal services, Laughinghouse as a law student at Rutgers, wrote Grant while he was incarcerated. In 1979, Laughinghouse moved to North Carolina to support efforts taking place in response to the Greensboro Massacre. He received a Reginald Lewis Community Lawyer Fellowship from Howard University that he used to work for the Greensboro Justice Fund and the Legal Services office in Wilson. Grant brought Laughinghouse into Farm Worker Legal Services at a time when they were addressing and doing outreach around issues that related to wages, the inhumane conditions in labor camps, workers compensations, peonage cases, and debt servitude. Years later, Laughinghouse recalled that he and Jim Grant "were

[105] Grant, "The Organized Unorganized."

digging deep." Because of the repression and fear created by employers, Laughinghouse remembers having to meet workers in funeral homes. On a number of occasions, Grant and Laughinghouse would sleep in their office on a roll out mattress so that they could be on time to meet Farmworkers at five o'clock in the morning.[106]

When the Workers: Know Your Rights Conference took place Jim Grant had a comprehensive understanding of the problems and needs of workers in the region. More importantly, the workers and their communities trusted him. If it was anything civil rights or justice-seeking related, Jim Grant was the man they called. In his reflection on Grant's life and contributions. Historian David Cecelski remembers a meeting he had with a woman in Belhaven who "kept Jim Grant's name and number by her telephone." The woman, who had been a victim of violence from the Ku Klux Klan told Cecelski that "Who else do you think I'm going to call if the Ku Klux Klan is shooting into my house or burning a cross in my front yard?...Honey, when you call Jim Grant, he's coming. He's coming right away, and when he gets here, I'm telling you, you will think that God sent you an avenging angel."[107]

[106] Angaza Laughinghouse, "BWFJ's Founding," October 3, 2022, interviewed by Ajamu Dillahunt, recording in possession of the author, Raleigh, NC.
[107] David Cecelski, "Jim Grant, in Memory," December 6, 2021, https://davidcecelski.com/2021/12/06/jim-grant-in-memory/?fbclid=IwAR2CW92eAORdZ33moJlMEFZLKgmGp9SgiX9ws0M_5PFwpJgyHhjJ_eeF0Tg

Figure 11: Photo of Jim Grant (right) next to Billy Harvey presenting at the Workers: Know Your Rights Conference. December 11, 1982. Source: Fruit of Labor World Culture Center, Raleigh, North Carolina.

As a result of Grant's reputation and the consistent outreach from BWFJ and the FLSC, the conference mobilized African Americans from six different counties located mainly in Eastern North Carolina: Wayne, Nash, Edgecombe, Martin, Duplin, and Wake. To mobilize these many workers was no easy task. In the early 1980s, the only way to get in contact with the workers that they were seeking to organize was face-to-face interaction. To reach people, the organizers of the conference had to go to people's homes. Oftentimes, people in the rural counties did not have transportation. By way of legal services, BWFJ was able to provide free transportation and food for conference participants. While the legal aspect was included, the main priority was to spark workers into motion, understand the problems facing them, be inspired by each other, commit to the fight long-term, and join BWFJ. Put another way, the main

goal was not to provide a legal service, but to empower the workers to organize and build the organizational strength of the Black Workers for Justice. In the front of the church was a banner that read “Workers: Know Your Rights Conference,” and in the back was a poster and table with information about BWFJ.

Figure 12: In the center of the photo is BWFJ OC member Alexander Evans and the sign for more information on Black Workers for Justice in the back. December 11, 1982. Source: Fruit of Labor World Culture Center, Raleigh, North Carolina.

The agenda they decided on and executed for the day-long conference included workshops on fighting discrimination, grievances, workfare, understanding the National Labor Relations Act, collective bargaining, and right-to-work laws. Following an informative day of workshops, the last three hours of the conference was dedicated to a rank-and-file speak out and the passing of resolutions. For the hour and fifteen-minute speak out, workers discussed issues they were experiencing on the job and shared key lessons they learned from struggles they

waged on the shop floor. The excitement, information, and energy that the conference sparked was translated into resolutions that would unite workers and give them "a sense of our power in moving as one force."[108] With the resolutions, workers would have a direct way to "keep in contact with each other" and coordinate "visits to share lessons and give support to each other's struggles."[109]

While some resolutions solidified future meetings and raised demands for free childcare, the majority of resolutions were concentrated on action items that opposed the newly established federal Community Work Experience Program, also known as Workfare. Workfare was introduced by the Reagan administration and sought to force recipients of welfare to work for no wages or benefits in order to receive their small welfare check. These welfare recipients, mainly women, would not be getting job insurance or paid vacation, sick leave, or workers compensation for workplace injuries. With their welfare check these forced workers would have to pay for their own childcare and transportation. If they refused to participate in workfare, their "welfare check can be cut off for three months." In addition to forcing welfare recipients to work in what BWFJ called "Slavery in the 80s," workfare would also impact and lead to job losses for employed workers. Workfare workers would begin to replace wage earning workers and undermine the power of unionized workplaces. Aware of the serious harm that could be caused by workfare to welfare recipients and employed workers, Jim Grant felt that fighting workfare should be an organizational priority for BWFJ. At the time of the conference, North Carolina Governor Jim Hunt and state senator Jesse Helms were advocating for workfare to be adopted in Pitt, Nash, Rowan, Moore, Davidson, and Caldwell counties. The resolutions passed on workfare

[108] "Workers: Know Your Rights Conference–Resolutions," document in possession of author.
[109] Ibid.

at the Workers: Know Your Rights Conference demanded public hearings on workfare to determine its implementation in the state and that workfare be replaced with meaningful job training programs. To achieve this, the conference passed additional resolutions that called for a statewide educational and petition campaign against workfare, and a letter writing campaign that opposed workfare on the local, county, and statewide level.[110]

In addition to passing collectively decided resolutions that energized workers in Eastern, North Carolina, The Workers: Know Your Rights Conference also played a crucial role in organizational building for the FLSC and BWFJ. FLSC called for a meeting in January 1983, at the home of Billy Harvey to discuss next steps for the struggle at Hardwood Dimensions Mill and other workplaces. BWFJ, on the other hand, used the historic gathering in Fremont to further consolidate its growing organization and execute its organizing plan. Prior to the conference, BWFJ formed an Organizing Committee (OC) that consisted of workers and activists from strategic workplaces and towns where BWFJ had or was building a base. On the OC was Alexander Evans, a sanitation worker in Rocky Mount whose unjust firing in 1978 sparked a strike of the city's sanitation workers; Saladin Muhammad an employee of Legal Services in Wilson, North Carolina; Naeema Muhammad, a Rocky Mount native and textile worker; Angaza Laughinghouse, an employee of Farm Worker Legal Services; Dennis Carroll, a worker in Duplin County; and Billy Harvey, a worker and leader in the Fremont struggle. The OC put together an organizing plan that used the Workers: Know Your Rights Conference as a point of departure and a way to implement its collectively decided strategy.

With its diverse OC that represented various sectors of the Black community and the Black working class, BWFJ was clear on and confident about the Black worker perspective that

[110] Ibid.

guided its founding. In the early pages of a pamphlet BWFJ published on its organizing program, the newly formed OC explained that "more than 90% of black people throughout the United States, must work for wages in order to meet their daily needs of food, clothing and housing." BWFJ surmised that "this 90% is known as the black working class." This working class, they stressed, "usually does the hardest, dirtiest and most dangerous work." Included in their description of the Black working class were the unemployed who "are the last hired and the last to be trained for the skilled jobs."[111] In BWFJ's estimation, the unemployed represented a part of the Black working class that should be organized in the fight for economic justice.

More directly, for its working class focus on Eastern North Carolina, BWFJ framed its organizing agenda in the context of being located in the Black Belt Region of the South. According to the African American leader Booker T. Washington, the term Black Belt was "first used to designate a part of the country which was distinguished by the colour of the soil. The part of the country possessing this thick, dark, and naturally rich soil was, of course, the part of the South where the slaves were most profitable, and consequently they were taken there in the largest numbers." It was "later, and especially since the [Civil] war," Washington continued, that "the term seems to be used wholly in a political sense—that is, to designate the counties where the black people outnumber the white." The Black Belt was not only a region of the country where slavery and continued exploitation reached its highest form, it is also a region that built statewide, regional, and national wealth for the United States. At the time when BWFJ's organizing plan was written, the Black Belt South was home to Black majority counties governed by all-white political structures, run away shops from the North, and right to work laws that made cheap labor and workplace exploitation possible.

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[111] "Black Workers for Justice's Organizing Program," 1.

Though mistreated and exploited, BWFJ maintained that the Black worker had the most potential to transform society and lead the African American people to freedom. BWFJ justified its argument about the centrality of the Black working class by asserting that "80% of the income in black communities come from the wages of their workers." Since that was the case, "the growth and progress of these communities will mainly depend upon, how much power the Black working class has to control the conditions of their labor and the politics in their community."[112] It was the thinking of BWFJ that to be effective and have a meaningful impact, the Black working class had to be organized. By organized, BWFJ meant that in order to express its power, the Black working class needed to collectively think, plan, strategize, and be intentional about using its position in the U.S. economy to help better the living and working conditions of its community. For BWFJ, the organization of the Black working class had to start in the workplace. In the early 1980s, Black workers were mainly employed in textile, transportation, agriculture, communications, auto, steel, and service industries. With these industries being important to the U.S. economy and dependent on Black labor, BWFJ believed that "if properly organized" the Black worker "can bring pressure to bare on the economy to help win improvements in the overall quality of life of Black people."[113] The workplace was seen as a key battleground for improving the societal needs of the entire African American community. After all, Black people were key to industries that could not function without their labor. That position of the Black worker represented an area of power that needed to be cultivated and built. BWFJ saw this as its main responsibility.

[112] "Black Workers for Justice: Organizing Program," 2.
[113] Ibid.

While making a broad case for the necessity of a Black workers organization for the entire Black community, BWFJ was more concerned about the practical aspect of the work and began unpacking concrete steps on how it sought to build an organization of Black workers in North Carolina. The organizing program of BWFJ insisted that a "starting point for organizing the power of the black working class, must not be based on a program full of 'way out' ideas." An effective organizing program, they argued, "addresses the basic problems they [the black working class] face on their jobs and as unemployed workers." For BWFJ, Black workers needed to be organized around issues of "wages and benefits to meet rising costs of living," "security against plant closing and general unemployment," "the right to organize unions," "opposing racist treatment and sexual harassment," "safe and health working conditions," "jobs and training for the unemployed and a living income," and "job promotions and access to jobs in all categories."[114] BWFJ was making the case that organizing the Black working class is a process and required a thorough understanding of worker consciousness. The organizer, BWFJ felt, had to be strategic and organize workers based on issues that were not far removed from their day-to-day reality. Most of the workers in Eastern North Carolina had never left their county or town they lived in. The workers' reality was hyper-localized and somewhat isolated from each other. While many of BWFJ's leaders were active anti-imperialist and felt that the Black working class should oppose and organize against international, national, and statewide issues, BWFJ concluded that those broad issues would not spark a class of people who had been disempowered to be willing to take political action. The best way to empower and activate the Black working class was to first address the issues that impacted their immediate concerns. In other words, BWFJ's organizing program suggested that a starting point for organizing was not the crisis

[114] Ibid., 3.

caused by US foreign policy or other national policy, the starting point was local issues that spoke directly to workers. To be clear, this was not ignoring important world issues, it was commitment to a strategy that was informed by and understood the consciousness of the masses of African Americans. BWFJ had a well-informed and calculated understanding of the community's readiness for social change. First you begin to address the needs of the workers and throughout that process, struggle by struggle, you show them how their local problems are connected to other statewide, national, and international struggles.

BWFJ recognized that identifying issues to organize against is one thing, but doing the actual organizing is another. To help guide its desire to organize workers on a large scale, the OC gave serious thought and answers to the question, "where do we start?" The new leaders of BWFJ asked themselves, how do you build an organizational infrastructure that encourages a class of people that have been neglected and exploited, to take action and recognize their power? As part of its organizing plan, BWFJ argued that "organizing the power of the black working class" must start by "build[ing] a black workers network of contacts at workplaces," and "build[ing] workplace committees using network contacts."[115] Other immediate action items for BWFJ was sponsoring regular educational and training activities for workers, encouraging Black workers to build caucuses in trade unions, work in collaboration with other organizations to build a national Black workers organization, facilitate the development of a rank and file council and newsletter to keep workers connected, and work in coalition with progressive labor organizations. In sum, BWFJ, from its inception, was aware of the necessity of coalitions and building united fronts to achieve justice for Black workers, the Black working class, and the Black liberation movement.

[115] Ibid.

Getting Started and Addressing Early Organizational Weakness

In this crucial building stage, BWFJ moved with urgency and discipline to follow up on conference resolutions and executing its organizing plan. Within the first few months of 1983, BWFJ had developed new and expanded already existing organizing campaigns and workplace committees in Wayne, Nash, Edgecombe, Martin, Duplin, and Wake counties. To aid the various struggles and stay true to its goal of keeping workers regularly connected through a newsletter, BWFJ used *Justice Speaks* to document workplace struggles they were involved in. One area that was gaining a lot of traction post-conference was the workplace committee being built with Rocky Mount sanitation workers. The struggle of the city's sanitation workers was important for BWFJ because ninety percent of the sanitation workers were Black. Prior to the conference, BWFJ leaders were doing on-sight visits with workers. Once the OC was established and the conference took place, the work among sanitation workers increased. Especially given Alexander Evans, an OC member, was a sanitation worker. Through *Justice Speaks*, BWFJ and the sanitation workers committee published a newsletter that they called *Clean Sweep! Voice of Rocky Mount City Workers*. In *Clean Sweep!*, the workers revealed the dangers and injuries sanitations workers faced on the job. A noteworthy article that appeared in one of *Clean Sweep!*'s newsletters was titled "Sanitation Workers Face Dangers!"[116] In it, the workers stressed that the injuries faced by sanitation workers were worse than that of underground mining workers. Sanitation workers in Rocky Mount would often suffer "strained backs, hernias, broken and cut off limbs, burns and deep cuts."[117] Workers also frequently got hepatitis from dumping trash at hospitals and were regularly exposed to carbon monoxide from their work trucks. Given

[116] "Sanitation Workers Face Dangers!" *Clean Sweep! Voice of Rocky Mount City Workers*, undated, 1.
[117] Ibid.

the dangers on the job and lack of protection, the workers ended the newsletter with a declaration on the need for city workers to be organized.

As part of their struggle, the Rocky Mount sanitation workers embraced and uplifted Dr. King's support for labor. In preparation for the twentieth anniversary of the March on Washington, the sanitation worker held an event honoring Dr. King and to raise money to help workers get to Washington D.C. to commemorate the historic march.[118] For Sanitation workers, support for Dr. King was close to home. When Dr. King was assassinated in 1968, he was supporting sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. At two o'clock in the morning, ten sanitation workers boarded a bus headed to D.C. with forty other residents and activists from Rocky Mount to honor Dr. King.[119]

On top of organizing sanitation workers into a workplace committee, BWFJ formed workplace committees in other parts of Eastern North Carolina. At Abbotts Laboratories in Rocky Mount, workers who packed and assembled hospital equipment were experiencing unjust working conditions and unfair sick policies. In its plants, Abbotts had started to replace some Black employees with robots. The company, however, did not give workers "any instructions about the operation of the robots" and "were only told not to hit the robots."[120] One day in 1983, *Justice Speaks* reported a worker had part of his foot cut off because he was unable to control and get out of the way of a robot.[121] If a worker was sick or had an injury on the job, they could be fired and blamed for uncontrollable circumstances. Also in 1983, a Black woman worker who

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[118] "Rocky Mount Sanitation Workers Honor: Martin L. King Program," 1983, document in possession of author.
[119] Ibid; Lucinda Trew, "Rocky Mount Rallies in D.C.," *The Rocky Mount Telegram*, September 4, 1983, 13. For more on Dr. King's support for sanitation workers see Michael K. Honey, *To the Promised Land: Martin Luther King and the Fight for Economic Justice* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018); Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).
[120] "Abbott's Robot Causes Accident," *Justice Speaks*, July 16-31, 1983, 1.
[121] Ibid.

had been employed at Abbotts for fourteen years was approached by management to sign a document that "she agrees not to be absent for any reason including for sickness and emergencies."[122] If she violated the agreement, she could be fired. The worker of fourteen years refused to sign the document and was fired. If a worker was not feeling well, management would not let them go home. If they did go home, they would be fired. As a result of this, one worker died on the assembly line, and one had a stroke and later died at the hospital.[123] *Justice Speaks* reported that "Abbott workers are beginning to fight back" by "holding meetings, exposing accidents, documenting harassment and firings, contacting OSHA and refusing to work when they are sick or have a doctor's appointment."[124] The young BWFJ was helping the workers build their committee, publish about their struggle and progress in *Justice Speaks*, and encouraged other workers to join the fight-back.

In Martin County, BWFJ started building strong committees among rank-and-file workers. After the Workers Know Your Rights Conference, Angaza Laughinghouse convened a meeting of six workers in Hamilton, North Carolina to discuss the conference, its resolutions, and workplace problems they were experiencing.[125] While this meeting was sparked by the convening of the Workers: Know Your Rights Conference, the foundation for it had been laid three years prior. Laughinghouse had worked with some of the workers at the meeting through legal services around housing and government benefits through an organization called the Hamilton Houses Improvement Association (HHIA).[126] The meeting that took place after the

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[122] "Abbott Workers Forced to Work While Sick," *Justice Speaks*, June 1987, 3; "Abbott Workers: In Danger without Community Support," 1983, document in possession of author.
[123] "Abbott's Profits Rise as Workers' Health Decline," *Justice Speaks*, undated, 1.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Angaza Laughinghouse to File of Martin County Labor Committee, February 24, 1983, 1.
[126] For the NC Grassroots conference that Laughinghouse was the lead organizer for in March 1982 took place in Hamilton. He had a history and solid relationship with the organizers that would make-up the MCLC. The 1982

conference expanded the HHIA's work beyond housing and encouraged them to organize themselves as workers. The six workers at the meeting decided to form the Martin County Labor Committee (MCLC). After a few productive meetings, twelve workers had been recruited into the MCLC and the group decided to divide its labor work into four main areas: perdue chicken workers, unemployed AFDC/Food stamp recipients, peanut and tobacco farm workers, and unemployed workers.[127] The problems at Perdue Chicken, a poultry plant, would occupy the majority of the committee's focus and activities. Most of the workers in the MCLC were employed or had been employed at Perdue and were committed to fighting against the mistreatment and terrible working conditions at the plant. In Martin County, Perdue had plants in Robersonville and Lewiston with a workforce that was 90% Black and over 60% women. These majority Black workers worked in cruel conditions. The managers and foremen were all white, workers were not provided with the necessary safety equipment (gloves, insulated clothing, mask, and boots), and if they did not keep up with "speed-ups," they could eventually be fired.[128] If a white worker could not keep up with the speed ups, there were no consequences and Black workers were forced to help them on top of their own responsibilities. In response to these working conditions, Laughinghouse and worker-leaders of the MCLC would regularly engage in leafleting and gate work to encourage workers to be part of an effort to change their treatment on the job. Eventually, the MCLC would reach a strong fifteen active members spread out through the towns of Oak City, Hamilton, Robersonville, and Williamston.[129]

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conference is likely what aided him in mobilizing people from that community to come to the Worker: Know Your Rights Conference in Fremont.

[127] Ibid., 6.

[128] Ibid., 2-3; "Perdue Workers Get Support of Unemployed and Employed Workers," *Justice Speaks*, May 1983, 1-4; "Perdue's Jive Safety Program and More Deadly Speed-up Means More 'Sickness,' 'Death,' and 'layoffs' for workers," *Justice Speaks*, March 1983, 1-2.

[129] "Organizing at Purdue," undated, document in possession of author; "Summary: Chronological outline of important date/phases of Organizing," undated, document in possession of author.

In addition to writing about Perdue workers in *Justice Speaks* and building workers leadership through the MCLC, BWFJ also helped make the struggle of Perdue workers a concern of the African American faith community. In April of 1983, BWFJ and the MCLC called for a Day of Action on Mother's Day for Perdue workers. Given Black women made up the majority of Perdue's workforce, BWFJ urged local ministers to consider the plight of Perdue workers and the triple oppression Black women faced: racism, sexism, and class oppression.[130] In a letter to local ministers, the workers and BWFJ asked for churches to dedicate 15 minutes to issues impacting workers at Perdue. BWFJ wanted the minister to know that the majority Black women workforce was being sexually harassed by white managers and being forced to work while pregnant. Like they did in Rocky Mount and Fremont, BWFJ was making the issues of workers at Perdue a cause that involves and impacts the entire Black community.

Laughinghouse, a young, energetic, and skilled organizer was helping lead the MCLC, but also helping build the labor work in Duplin County alongside BWFJ OC member Dennis Carroll. For the Workers: Know Your Rights Conference, representatives from Duplin County came as part of an already existing organization, the Duplin County Concerned Citizens. The DCCC sent seven workers to the conference and after the conference they formed a Labor Committee within their already existing organizational structure.[131] At the time, Duplin County had a population of 40,000 people with African Americans making up 38% of the population. The industries in the county were agriculture based, poultry, wholesale and retail, and manufacturing. Workers who were part of DCCC's Labor Committee were mainly packing

[130] Black Workers for Justice, "Mother's Day: A Day of Solidarity with Purdue Workers," April 22, 1983, 1-2.
[131] Angaza Laughinghouse and Dennis Carrol, "The History of our 'Labor Committee' and the Bright Future Ahead," undated, document in possession of author.

house workers, farmworkers, and construction workers.[132] The twenty-three Black workers active in the Labor Committee lived in the towns of Faison, Warsaw, and Rose Hill. In some of the early meetings, these workers decided to host a Workers: Know Your Rights Conference for Duplin County and initiated the building of a workplace committee among poultry and pickle packing house workers. To build out its Labor Committee in Duplin County and prepare for the conference, BWFJ leaders regularly engaged in gate work and house meetings where they disseminated information and did the leg work to begin building the foundation for workers power in their county.

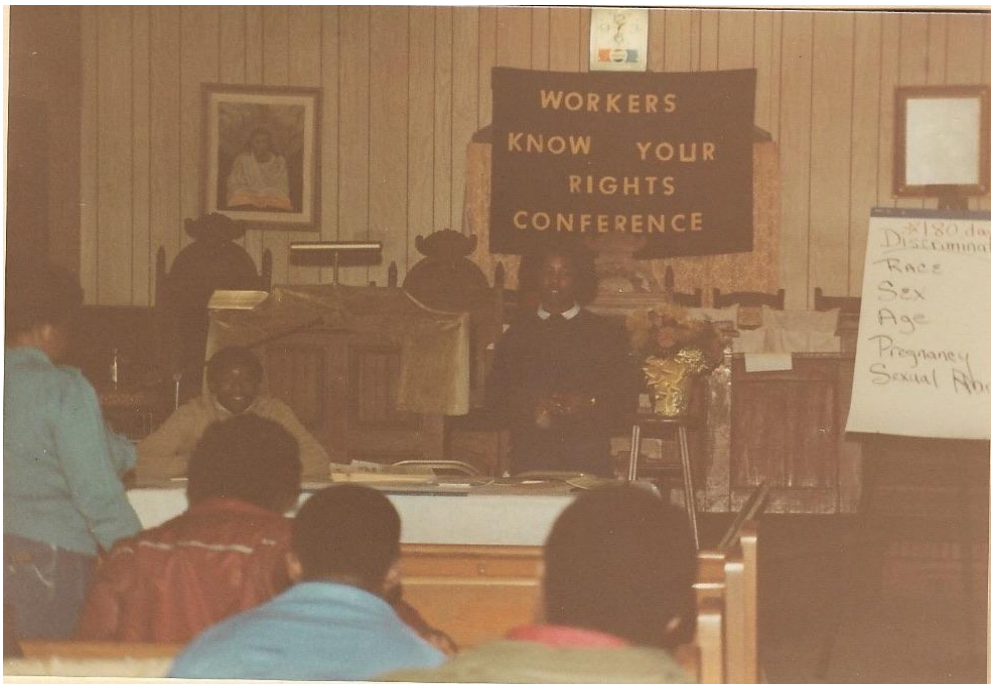

Figure 13: Photo of BWFJ OC member Dennis Carrol speaking at the Workers Know Your Rights Conference in Fremont, North Carolina. Source: Fruit of Labor World Culture Center.

At this point of high activity for BWFJ, they adopted the important organizational practice of assessing its work. Despite making unbelievable strides in its organizing of Black

[132] "Duplin County Concerned Citizens (Labor Support/Community Organization)," undated, document in possession of author; "Duplin County Concerned Citizens/Labor Committee," undated, document in possession of author.

workers in North Carolina, the young BWFJ did not romanticize its work and regularly reflected on its strengths and weaknesses. Laughinghouse reported that some of the strengths in the MCLC work was that the workers were bold and consistent. He further noted that the MCLC leaders thought of creative ways to combat the fear of their co-workers and actively wrote for and distributed issues of *Justice Speaks*. In Duplin County on the other hand, they had good leadership potential and clear perspective on the importance of being class conscious, but the work there was never able to gain traction.

On November 8, 1983, taking into consideration the work in the various counties, Saladin Muhammad wrote "Black Workers for Justice: State of Organization Report." In this comprehensive assessment of the organization, Muhammad admitted that the BWFJ was learning that organizing workplace committees "are not as easy as they sound," or as "written down on paper in the BWFJ Organizing Program."[133] One reason that Muhammad felt BWFJ was experiencing difficulties and some frustration was because they were making decisions based on a non-cohesive view of the bigger national and international political, economic, and trade union crisis. After providing brief but thorough context of the "bigger picture," Muhammad unpacked how it directly related to BWFJ's work and early shortcomings. In his estimation, he felt the struggle in Fremont could have benefited from a grounded perspective on the limitations of the trade union movement of the time. By not taking into account the weakness of organized labor, BWFJ and the workplace committee it formed at Hardwood Dimension Mill was not prepared for the lack of commitment and resources that the Carpenters would invest in a union drive.

Though there were strengths of the workplace committees that had been built in Martin and Duplin County, there were also challenges in terms of resources, limited political

[133] "Black Workers for Justice: State of Organization Report," November 8, 1983, 1.

perspective, and style of work. The State of the Organization Report diagnosed the challenges in both counties as being a result of "OC members in those areas, hav[ing] failed to grasp the process of organizing those workers and local committees."[134] Saladin Muhmmad had to regularly remind Laughinghouse to be patient. By patient Muhammad meant that the BWFJ "can't take an urban attitude and style of work in a rural area without modification."[135] Prior to coming to North Carolina, Laughinghouse did most of his organizing in New York, he was used to things developing quickly. In a letter to Laughinghouse, Muhammad urged him to "stop pushing to hard" and see the work in Duplin County as part of a process. Muhammad also encouraged Laughinghouse to let the other OC member Dennis Carroll who had less experience, chair some of the meetings for the Duplin County Labor Committee. The work in Martin and Duplin County likely sparked Muhammad to put in the report that one of the main tasks of OC members was the "building [of] strong local committees." In order to do this, Muhammad cautioned against the OC practicing individualism and the "tendency of replacing the process of building strong local committees, with themselves as individuals trying to do all of the work and make the major decisions in the areas." The main task of the OC member and organizer was to "assist and influence the process of organizational development; not by-pass it and declare it into existence by propaganda alone."[136] In sum, the report emphasized that if there was a united understanding of the "larger picture," OC members would better grasp the entrenched societal oppression that makes change difficult and at times, slow in the Eastern region of the state.

The need for patience and organizational honesty was a major theme in the report. It was emphasized that BWFJ "must stop jumping from one issue and workplace to another, without

[134] Ibid., 12.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid., 13.

building a solid organization and base of activity and influence among those workers."[137] The thinking of BWFJ suggested that by concentrating on a specific workplace and building a base it set the foundation for "long term struggle" and created the opportunity for the OC members to concentrate on "expand[ing] that base through recruitment and education." When the workers are gathered, Muhammad felt that if BWFJ wanted to have an impact "pulling workers together to talk about the historical need for a Black workers organization and giving them a copy of our organizing program" was not enough or the best strategic starting point. He referenced the organizing program and stressed that workers had to be organized "around concrete issues and struggles growing out of the workplaces."[138] As a young organization, he felt that BWFJ needed to be careful and "overcome the tendency of exaggerating the organizational strength of the BWFJ." While they "have done good work and should be proud of it," Muhammad recommended BWFJ "not mislead people about our capabilities." Instead, he believed BWFJ should earn the reputation of "being honest and accountable for our words and deeds." And to also "be known as hard workers" and "practical thinkers."[139]

Certainly, what they were able to achieve in a short period of time was impressive, but the young BWFJ was not satisfied and wanted to make improvements to its organizing practice. That is, BWFJ wanted to remove bad organizational practices early on. This process of deep and honest summation not only made the work better and more effective. Engaging in the practice of honest summation was healthy for the longevity of the organization.

[137] Ibid., 12.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid., 14.

Entering the Fight for Voting Rights and Political Power: The Case of Rocky Mount and Fremont

While the workplace was a major emphasis of the BWFJ's organizing program, the organization also had an emphasis on Black workers being an integral part of fighting racism and mistreatment outside of the workplace. In *Clean Sweep!* and *Justice Speaks* there were articles that encouraged participation in the electoral process. In one of its articles, the worker-editors of *Clean Sweep!* urged "all city workers and their families" to register and vote.[140] In a concise manner, *Clean Sweep!* laid out the role that council played in the workplace issues impacting city workers and encouraged workers to be leaders in "clean[ing] up the city" in the upcoming election.[141] In *Justice Speaks*, BWFJ uplifted the necessity of workplace organizing, but they also believed workers need to be actively engaged on the "electoral front." The way in which BWFJ advocated for electoral engagement was not narrow, the organization's view of electoral organizing maintained that "We must not only fight against what the politicians do wrong; we must fight to replace the wrong politicians, with those who have and will continue to take a firm stand on the side of the black, working and poor people in the towns, counties and state of North Carolina and throughout the country."[142] Even more, as an action item in its organizing program, the young BWFJ prioritized "building labor committees inside of community based, county, state and national black organizations to unite the struggles at the workplace with the struggles in the communities."[143] In 1983, this action item and BWFJ's declaration of being a "work-place based community organization" was put to test. During that same year, Abner Berry's direct mentorship, guidance and political determination was felt by BWFJ.

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[140] "Register to Vote!" *Clean Sweep! Voice of Rocky Mount City Workers*, undated, 2.
[141] Ibid.
[142] "Register to Vote!" *Justice Speaks*, July 1983, 1
[143] "Black Workers for Justice: Organizing Program," 4.

Still working as an employment law specialist, Muhammad's Legal Services office filed a Voting Rights lawsuit against the city of Rocky Mount in 1983. At a meeting held by the Rocky Mount chapter of the National Black Independent Political Party (NBIPP) at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, Alexander Evans, still active on BWFJ's OC, gave the local chapter of NBIPP its marching orders and stressed the need to fight voter suppression. According to Muhammad, Evans talked about the connection between the sanitation workers strike in 1978 and the lack of Black representation on city council.[144] Evans knew that there was a direct connection between his unjust firing in 1978 that led to the sanitation strike and the Rocky Mount City council being all-white. The all-white city council controlled all decisions related to the 90% Black sanitation workers. Evans and others felt that the city would not have been able to get away with how they treated him and other African American residents and employees if Black people had their rightful voice in local government. At the time, Rocky Mount had a white majority population and an at-large voting system. In an at-large voting system, voters could vote for a ward they did not live in. Because Rocky Mount had a white majority, an African American could never win an election. Longtime community and welfare activist Naomi Greene ran for an at-large seat in 1981 but lost by a narrow margin. This was a prime example of a city committed to maintaining white domination and preventing Black political power and governance.

After the meeting at Ebenezer Baptist Church, several local leaders met and decided to challenge the local white power structure by filing a Voting Rights lawsuit. The multi-layered lawsuit would challenge the city on three main legal grounds. The first legal argument was that the current electoral system in Rocky Mount violated Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act.[145]

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[144] Saladin Muhammad, "Voting Rights Lawsuit," February 24, 2020, interviewed by Ajamu Dillahunt, recording in possession of the author, Raleigh, NC.
[145] "Election Delay Possible," *The Rocky Mount Telegram*, September 29,1983, 13.

Rocky Mount had recently annexed "areas that are either predominantly white or later developed into predominantly white population centers."[146] For the upcoming election, the City Council approved of the new annexed areas to participate in the upcoming election. The lawsuit firmly asserted that the council's decision went against section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, which required any changes to maps or election laws in the South to be approved by the federal government. Rocky Mount's city council did not do that. The second legal argument in the lawsuit was that the at-large system violated section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. Section 2 "prohibits voting practices or procedures that discriminate on the basis of race, color, or membership in one of the language minority groups." In the lawsuit, the attorney maintained that the structure of the at-large system "results in a denial or abridgement of the right of the plaintiffs to vote on account of race or color."[147] The last and final legal argument declared that the at-large system was not only in violation of section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, but it was also unconstitutional and violated the 14th and 15th amendments. It was argued that the city council subscribed to the at-large system "for discriminatory purposes of diluting, minimizing and canceling black voting strength."[148]

Certainly, a compelling lawsuit, the legal team now needed plaintiffs. Due to the lawsuit having the potential to uproot the local white power structure, it came with a significant amount of risk. Some residents who supported the fight against voter suppression and led the call for an end to the at-large system, were not in the position to deal with potential consequences. There were, however, five residents who were willing to make the sacrifice. Naomi Greene and Anne Underhill of Nash-Edgecombe Community Advocates stepped forward. The other plaintiffs were

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[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid.; Ken Murchison, "Justice Department Lifts Objection to Annexation," *The Rocky Mount Telegram,* May 10, 1985, 1.

Gary Banks, Peter White, and Abner Berry, all members of the young BWFJ. Banks worked at Hardees food systems in its manufacturing plant, White was the brother of Saladin Muhammad, and Abner Berry was eighty-two years old and the oldest plaintiff on the lawsuit. Berry was an organizational mentor and member who was the main advocate for BWFJ's participation in the lawsuit. Saladin Muhammad remembered at one of the many meetings BWFJ would have at Berry's apartment, he expressed that BWFJ's participation in the lawsuit "would provide an understanding that the Black Workers for Justice was fighting to increase the power of Black people in the electoral arena."[149] Berry also believed that being part of the suit would "help to promote the importance of organized Black workers to the broader North Carolina Black community."[150] Being located in a state that had one of the lowest union density rates and a culture of anti-unionism, Berry stressed that the lawsuit "would provide some community protection for the organizing work of the BWFJ."[151] In sum, Berry felt that "BWFJ would become isolated and defeated without the support of the Black community."[152] The lawsuit would help BWFJ earn the support of the local Black community.

As expected, the council attempted to "delegitimize" the lawsuit and defend the at-large system.[153] One of their strategies to attack the credibility of the lawsuit was to come for Abner Berry. They had gotten news that he was on the central committee of the Communist Party USA and put out the word that they were looking for him. Perhaps the white power structure wanted to intimidate him and have him reconsider his participation in the lawsuit. Of course, that did not work. Instead of retreating or backing down, the wheelchair bound 83-year-old raised his fist at a

[149] Muhammad, "Voting Rights Lawsuit."
[150] *BWFJ Celebrates and Reflects on 20 Years of a Black Workers Organization!* (Rocky Mount, NC: Black Workers for Justice, 2002), 3.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.
[153] "City Defends At-Large system," *The Nashville Graphic*, November 17, 1983, 1

BWFJ meeting and told his BWFJ comrades, "Let them come. What an honor it would be to die for self-determination!"[154] The council defended the at-large system by telling the press that since the at-large system was introduced in 1961, two Black people had held political office. For them, that was "proof" that the at-large system was just and non-discriminatory.

The lawsuit was filed in September 1983. On February 24, 1984, the United States Justice Department ruled in favor of the five plaintiffs. It was argued by the federal government that although the annexation would decrease the Black population by 1.1%, the annexation "would enhance 'the ability of the white majority to control the election of all council members.'" In response to this ruling, the city council submitted a new election structure to the federal government that divided "the city into seven single-member wards." In the wards, "each council member will be voted on only by residents of that ward."[155] For the wards proposed by the city, Black people were the majority in wards one, two, and three. That is, Black people would occupy three out of the seven city council seats. The at-large system had been defeated.

Despite only being in existence for a little over a year, BWFJ was part of an effort that successfully fought white domination and opened the pathway for Black political power and representation. Not long after the ruling came in about the voting rights lawsuit, Jesse Jackson visited the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Rocky Mount during his first run for president in 1984. In a packed house, Jackson called Berry up to the stage and praised him for his role in the lawsuit. Saladin Muhmmad remembered Jackson lifting up Berry's arm high in the air in a manner that "praised him as one of our [movement] heroes."[156]

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[154] Muhammad, "Voting Rights Lawsuit."
[155] Murchison, "Justice Department Lifts Objection to Annexation," 1.
[156] Muhammad, "Voting Rights Lawsuit."

Beyond Rocky Mount, 1984 represented a new phase of struggle for BWFJ's work in Fremont. Under the leadership of OC member Billy Harvey, BWFJ's work in Fremont joined the fight for Black political power and ran local leaders for office. Leading up to the Workers: Know Your Rights Conference, the workers at the sawmill had led a workplace and community struggle that reversed the 10% pay cut. The next step post-conference was to go all-in for the union vote. Unfortunately, after a strong effort, the workers at the Mill did not win the union vote. Despite the unsuccessful union drive, the movement the workers ignited around workplace problems at the Mill led to a larger movement being built in Fremont that challenged racism and political disempowerment outside of the workplace. The movement that emerged because of the Hardwood Dimensions Mill fight, BWFJ closely related to it and in some cases, they helped give it some direction. Out of the Mill struggle emerged the Concerned Black Citizens of Fremont (CBCF) to oppose and fight against all-forms of racism impacting Fremont's Black residents.

The Black community in Fremont did not just experience racism on the job and in the political system, they also experienced it from the town police. In 1983, the CBCF and the FLSC waged a struggle against the entrenched racism of the police department. According to *Justice Speaks*, Black police officers in Fremont were being paid less and having their hours cut, while white officers got more hours and higher pay.[157] In support of a Black officer who filed a complaint against the department, the CBCF and FLSC began to mobilize to have a consistent presence at town council meetings. At the council meetings, the community demanded that "non-discriminatory public policies be set, with community input into those policies." They simply wanted the town to practice democratic principles and include the community in its decision-making process. The all-white town governing body was not interested in that. Racism in the

[157] "End Job Discrimination and Unemployment in Fremont," *Justice Speaks,* July 16-31, 1983, 1.

town was so bad that the police chief was known out for calling African American residents "nigger." Though there was proof and confirmation the chief used racist language on multiple occasions, the town "denied all charges of discrimination."[158] Any informed suggestion or recommendations that Black residents of Fremont brought to the Town Commission was ignored. It was like the CBCF was talking to a brick wall.

The CBCF and FLSC did not back down and kept putting pressure on the town. On July 6, 1983, the two organizations held a press conference at one of the Town's community centers. In the press release, they announced that they were launching a campaign against the town "charging citizens a $2.50 fee for garbage pick-up; against job discrimination in the Town's police department; and calling for an investigation into the Town's policy, finance and administrative decisions and practices authorized by the Mayor and Town Commissioners." Their campaign and petition were calling for the city not to impose a garbage fee onto residents. Instead, they recommended it be put on the ballot and the community be able to vote on it. They also called on state officials, the statewide utilities commissioner and the NC Labor Commissioner "to investigate unreasonable utility rate increases" and "investigate possible violations in the Town's employment practices."[159]

To close out the press release, the CBCF and FLSC declared that in response to the ongoing mistreatment and neglect of African American and poor residents in Fremont, they were going to "conduct a major voter registration drive with the aim of running and supporting black and other responsible candidates for public office."[160] Like Rocky Mount, there were no Black elected officials and it became clear that if the Black community wanted to bring about change,

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[158] Ibid.
[159] Concerned Black Citizens of Fremont and Fair Labor Support Committee Press Release, July 6, 1983.
[160] Ibid.

they would have to wage a struggle for political power. They would have to be the decision makers. The CBCF and FLSC knew this. The two organizations reached the conclusion that the lack of concern for "black and poor citizens" from local officials "results largely from the lack of black political representation and citizens participation in the Town's decision-making process."[161] In Rocky Mount, they challenged this same issue through the voting rights lawsuit, in Fremont they first challenged the local white power structure by running Billy Harvey and Leon Ruffin for Town Commissioner.

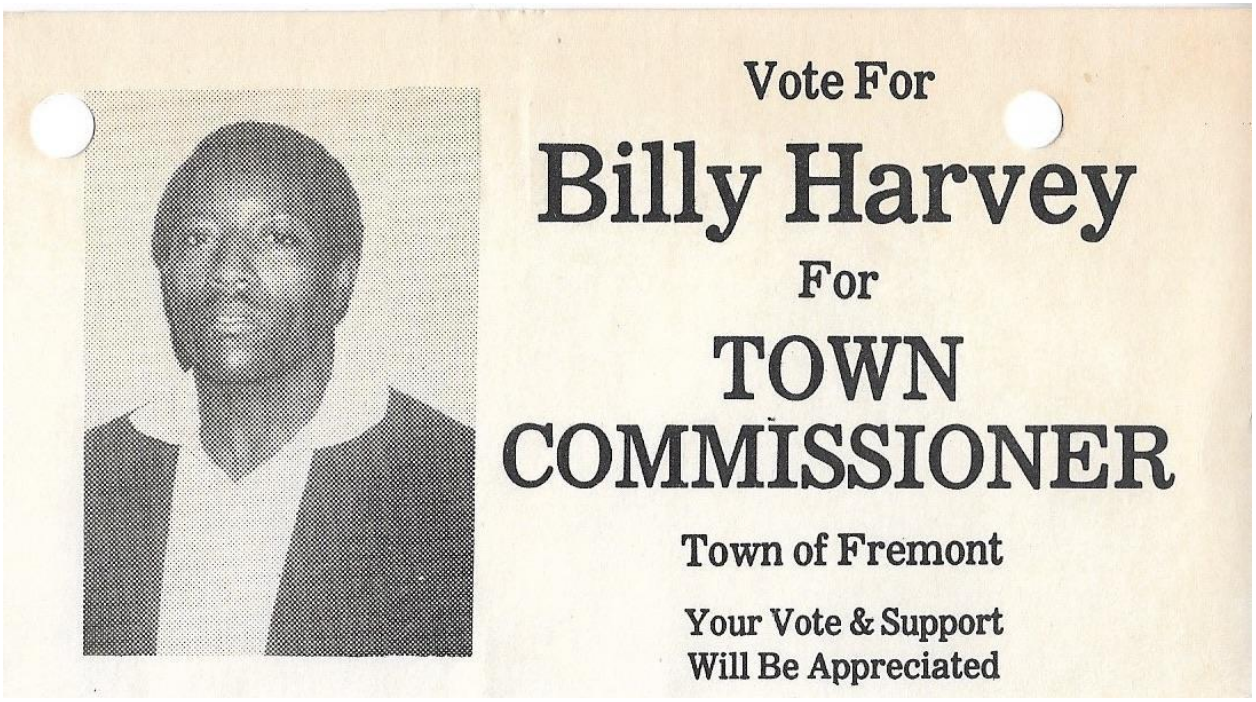

Figure 14: BWFJ OC Member Bill Harvey's Campaign Material. Photo Source: Fruit of Labor World Culture Center.

Harvey and Ruffin were ready to take on the power structure that prevented African American advancement in Fremont. At the time of the election, Harvey had been on BWFJ's Organizing Committee for over a year and helped lead the CBCF and FLSC. Ruffin on the other hand, was not on BWFJ's OC but was a brick mason and contractor who had been active with both the

[161] Ibid.

CBCF and FLSC activities. With the Town Commissioner not responding to the over 250 signatures that was collected to address the racism in the police department, increase in electric bills, and garbage fee, Harvey and Ruffin told voters that the people in Fremont cannot "allow the uncaring elected officials on the Board to go unchallenged in the upcoming elections." The two men in their campaign materials laid out the need for Black Commissioners to fight the local atrocities in Fremont but also stand firm against the harms that could come from Reagan and the state of North Carolina. The two men stressed that Fremont needed "people to not cave into Reagan and Helms" and who would bring a new vision for Fremont that was concerned about all its residents. Harvey and Ruffin proclaimed that they "want to see Fremont become a town with a healthy economy, that can provide decent housing, neighborhood improvements, decent paying jobs and a clean environment for all of the residents."[162] Having built a base through the CBCF and FLSC, a Harvey and Ruffin election to Town Commissioner was not unrealistic. The two men had a proven history of uncompromising dedication. When the results came in for the election though, Ruffin had won, and Harvey had lost.

Although he lost, some of the Town's leadership made clear their dissatisfaction with Harvey's decision to run for Town Commissioner. The local police began to tail Harvey's son. Because there was a possibility of violence from the police or the Ku Klux Klan, Saladin Muhammad with his weapon right next to him, went to go stay with Harvey and his family for a few days.[163] During the time Muhammad was staying with Harvey, one of Harvey's co-workers told him "Billy you gotta watch yourself, you gotta watch yourself." Word got out that the police chief asked the newly elected mayor if he knew "somebody from the Klan that can come and

[162] "Vote for Billy Harvey and Leroy Ruffin for Town Commissioners," October 1983, Archives of the Fruit of Labor World Culture Center, Raleigh, North Carolina.
[163] Muhammad, "BWFJ Group Oral History 2."

lynch Billy and shut his mouth up."[164] At the mayor's inauguration, Harvey stood up and said, "I want this town investigated!" Harvey told the council and packed crowd of Fremont residents that "somebody who is now an official council person and the police chief threatened to lynch me."[165] The commissioners assigned the investigation to the Town's attorney who wrote what was supposed to be a confidential letter to Harvey about the investigation. The attorney, however, sent it to the local newspaper who published it and put Harvey's life in even more danger. Outside of a funeral home in Fremont, BWFJ called for the investigation on the threats to Billy Harvey be handed off to the State Bureau of Investigation.[166] In addition to Harvey being threatened, other BWFJ members doing work in Fremont also experienced threats and acts of violence. On one occasion, Saladin Muhammad was driving back to Rocky Mount from Fremont and a group of white men tried to run his car off the road.[167]

BWFJ nor Harvey got discouraged about the election results or the threats. Continuing to fight was the main priority. At the same time of the threats, BWFJ was developing a strategy to replace the town's at-large electoral system. One of the reasons Harvey was not elected is because Fremont, like its neighbors in Rocky Mount, had a white majority and an at-large voting system. Despite being over 40% of the population it was almost impossible for African Americans to win seats that matched its population numbers. That is, Black people were always underrepresented even after the election of Leon Ruffin. To fight the at-large system in Fremont, BWFJ felt that there had to be more than a legal battle. The organization felt that the most important aspect of fighting for voting rights in Fremont was "organizing and raising the

[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Press Conference on Addressing the Threat of Violence Against Billy Harvey, December 30, 2022.
[167] Roy Jones, "Freedom in Motion," *Afro-American Liberator*, February/March 1984, 1.

awareness of the Black community and involving the majority of people in some level of activity." BWFJ further asserted that "if the people are not mobilized and made aware of their power to make positive political change, they will not be able to effectively use a true ward system to bring progress to the town."[168] The last major strategy point that BWFJ believed needed to be at the center of the Fremont struggle for voting rights was a platform for long term engagement. If the fight to establish a true ward system is won, what do we want to hold the new Black elected officials accountable too? In preparation for the new election in four years (1987), BWFJ and its base in Fremont began to protest at Town Commissioner meetings and hosted educational forums about the unjust nature of the at-large system. By the time the 1987 election came around, BWFJ did not have to file a lawsuit because their organizing worked, and Fremont voted to establish a ward system with three out of the six wards being majority Black. Under this new system, Leon Ruffin was elected to a second term, Billy Harvey (BWFJ and FLSC) and Sylvester Artist (president of CBCF) were elected to their first term. BWFJ had taken down two at-large systems in Eastern North Carolina and described the three new elected officials in Fremont as "long standing fighters for Fremont improvements and social change" who would be "accountable to workers and community rights and needs."[169]

In Fremont, BWFJ was helping to facilitate a total societal transformation. Fremont was a true example about how a struggle in the workplace can lead to changes in the larger society. Since they began doing work in Fremont in 1982, they engaged in a local workplace struggle, challenged racist governing structures, and ran Black working-class leaders for office. They also played an instrumental role in building an institution to meet the health care needs of the workers

[168] Untitled document on the at-large system in Rocky Mount, housed in The Communiversity, Rocky Mount, NC.
[169] "Fremont Elects First Black Majority Council," *Justice Speaks*, December 1987, 3.

and people of Fremont. In 1984, at a meeting with the North Carolina Student Rural Health Coalition, BWFJ suggested that the organization consider hosting its annual Health Fair in Fremont. BWFJ saw this as "building a workers and residents health and safety movement in Wayne County" and "lead[ing] to the development of workplace health and safety committees, rural community health screening clinics, and a greater awareness of the people about their health needs so as to fight for protections in their union contracts and to hold their public officials accountable."[170] The roughly week-long screening provided free physicals for over 450 residents, tested peoples breathing, and "there were some first time diagnosis of serious illnesses and diseases found by the screening." Billy Harvey, still active in BWFJ, helped lead the Health Fair Committee that gathered "information and identifying resources for setting up as a Community Health Clinic."[171] At present (2023), the Community Health Clinic that was established is still operating today and is known as the Fremont People's Clinic.

Raleigh and Beginning to Set the Stage for Organizational Consolidation

While the majority of BWFJ's workplace activities and community work unfolded in Eastern North Carolina, Raleigh would develop into its only base area outside of the eastern part of the state. From 1981-1982, BWFJ's relationship to Raleigh took on a more supportive character. During the Kmart struggle, activists in Raleigh through the Raleigh Black United Front boycotted and got petition signatures signed. When the Fremont struggle emerged Ajamu Dillahunt went to take pictures and developed an educational slideshow, while Angaza Laughinghouse who worked in Newton Groove but lived in Raleigh, helped organize the Fair Labor Support Committee. In 1983, after the Workers Know Your Rights Conference in

[170] "Fremont: Ten-Day Health Screening: A Big Success," *Justice Speaks*, 1984, 4; Jim Wrenn, "Building the African American Peoples Empowerment Movement: Learning from the Fremont Model," unpublished, 1993.
[171] Ibid.

Fremont, the Raleigh work began to overlap and become part of the BWFJ organizational structure. It is important to note that those active in Raleigh were not dedicating all their time to support work out east, they had their own local history of worker and community struggles. Involved in this work was a range of people, but in the context of BWFJ, it was mainly centered around the work of Ajamu and Rukiya Dillahunt, and Angaza Laughinghouse.

The Dillahunts moved to Raleigh in 1978 from New York. But by no means were they new to the region. Rukiya was born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina and Ajamu's father was from New Bern, North Carolina and as a kid he would spend his summers in North Carolina with family. With this permanent move to the region, however, they brought more than just a personal connection. It was now political. Guiding their thinking was a commitment to the struggle for social change and the belief that the South was a key area of struggle for the African American people. While in New York during the late 1960s, Ajamu and Rukiya were shaped by the Black nationalist institution, The East.[172] By 1971, Ajamu had gotten a job as the Associate Dean of Students at the State University of New York at New Paltz and got his master's degree in African Studies, while Rukiya worked as a schoolteacher and enrolled in Swahili classes. At New Paultz, Ajamu met Howard "Stretch" Johnson, a former Black Communist Party leader who was teaching in the Sociology Department and had been in the Party at the same time as Abner Berry. Ajamu remembered Johnson being a tall handsome Black man who was very

[172] Kwasi Konadu, *A View From The East: Black Cultural Nationalism and Education in New York City* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009), xx-xxi. The Dillahunts remember The East responding to issues around police brutality, supporting those under attack in the Revolutionary Action Movement, and hosting a Black political party convention. They remember reading The East's monthly newsletter *Black News* where they got updates about the Black Panther Party and other Black freedom organizations and activities. In addition to politics, The East was also a deep cultural inspiration for the Dillahunts. They began to look at Africa and started wearing African clothing. In 1969, when their first child was born, because of their experiences at The East and growing interest in Africa, they gave her an African name.

dignified and always had a smile on his face and a sparkle in his eyes.[173] Johnson served as the Dillahunts mentor and would talk to them about his time in the Party and provide analysis on the contemporary struggle of Black people. Outside of the relationship with Johnson, the Dillahunts joined the Amilcar Cabral/Paul Robeson Collective (ACPRC) where they formed a study group and began to engage in organizing activities on campus. The ACPRC's work was part of the New Communist Movement.[174]

When they moved to North Carolina, the ACPRC had been in deep study of works by Mao Zedong, Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Harry Haywood on the Negro Question, E. Franklin Frazier, W.E.B. Du Bois, William Foster, Phillip Foner, and Bill McAdoo. Like many others, the ACPRC had come to view African Americans in the South as an oppressed nation. In addition to the South, ACPRC adopted the view that in order to transform society, revolutionaries needed to go to the workplace and organize there. In 1978, this is what the Dillahunts intended to do. Rukiya got a job teaching and Ajamu worked for a drug rehabilitation program, then started working in a factory.

One year after the Dillahunts moved to Raleigh, Laughinghouse moved to the area from New York. He too had family roots in North Carolina and visited his North Carolina family during the summer. His move to North Carolina was for political reasons. In 1978, he was in Raleigh-Durham temporarily to work with Attorney Irving Joyner on the Student Mobilization Project. What brought him down permanently was an eagerness to help bring justice for those killed in the Greensboro Massacre in 1979. When he came down, Laughinghouse brought a

[173]Ajamu and Rukiya Dillahunt, "BWFJ Interview," October 21, 2019, interviewed by Ajamu Dillahunt, recording in possession of the author, Raleigh, North Carolina.
[174] Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (New York: Verso Books, 2002), 94. Also see page 145 on the importance of building a Party among various forces in the New Communist Movement.

range of noteworthy political experiences. After graduating from high school, Laughinghouse was recruited to Harlem Fight Back and mentored by its founder James Haughton. Harlem Fight Back under the leadership of Haughton was fighting discrimination in the building trades in New York. Haughton was also involved in the Negro American Labor Council and later wrote a popular and widely circulated pamphlet titled "The Centrality of the Black Worker." Laughinghouse later recalled that "Jim was a strong believer that if you are going to build long term freedom fighters, revolutionary cadre, that you got to study and draw lessons from your practice and use theory to try and guide your practice."[175] After some time with Haughton, Laughinghouse was recruited to work with the Workers Defense League with A. Phillip Randolph and Bayard Rustin.

Laughinghouse would eventually get a scholarship to do his undergraduate studies at Columbia University and directly after, enrolled in Rutgers Law School with the belief that law was a critical tool needed to advance the struggle of oppressed people. While a student at Columbia, Laughinghouse joined the Student Organization for Black Unity (SOBU/YOBU). At Rutgers law, Laughinghouse participated in the Prisoners' Rights Organized Defense Clinic and got a chance to work with Lennox S. Hinds on the Assata Shakur case, researched and worked with attorney Irving Joyner and the Commission for Racial Justice on the North Carolina based Charlotte Three and Wilmington Ten cases. Once he graduated, as a lawyer and involved with the National Conference of Black Lawyers (NCBL), he successfully filed a lawsuit demanding all the COINTELPRO records.

By 1980, the Dillahunts and Laughinghouse having come down for similar reasons, wasted no time embedding themselves into community and political struggles. In 1980, all three

[175] Angaza Laughinghouse, "Pre-Black Workers For Justice," May 7, 2019, interviewed by Ajamu Dillahunt, recording in possession of the author, Raleigh, NC.

activists attended the founding conference of the Black United Front where Rukiya was appointed secretary of the national organization. That same year, the Raleigh Black United Front (RBUF) chapter was established and Ajamu and Laughinghouse both got jobs at legal services. The Dillahunts recalled helping build the RBUF because "there were no organizations we thought we could be a part of, and we wanted to build something a little more militant."[176] But the work with the RBUF was not their full-time job and happened after work. Rukiya was in the school system, Ajamu was hired as a community educator with Eastern North Carolina Legal Services located in Smithfield, North Carolina and Laughinghouse was with Farm Worker Legal Services in Newton Grove. Initially, the work of the RBUF was not workplace or labor focused. When it was founded in 1980, the RBUF was deep in community struggles against police brutality. In early 1982, when Saladin Muhammad brought the issues of the Kmart workers to Raleigh, RBUF was only two years old and had been fighting police brutality and were demanding a civilian review board. The RBUF viewed itself as an organization that was home to a diverse group of black people, "united around a program of Black liberation" and committed to achieving Black liberation through "boycotts, marches, pickets, demonstrations, rallies, petitions, electoral campaigns and legal actions."[177]

In the spring of 1982, things began to shift for the RBUF and its organizational direction. Shortly after the Kmart boycott, the RBUF conducted a door-to-door campaign in Black working class neighborhoods in Raleigh around government budget cuts. As a result of the door knocking and other experiences, a faction within the RBUF felt the organization needed to concentrate more of its organizational program on the needs of African American workers. The Dillahunts

[176] Ajamu and Rukiya Dillahunt, "BWFJ Interview."
[177] "Raleigh Black United Front: Statement of Purpose," document in possession of author.

and a few others were part of building the Labor Committee within the RBUF. In 1981, with the attacks on legal services by the Reagan administration, Ajamu no longer worked for legal services. As part of a strategic direction, he got a job at the Post Office and through the work of the Labor Committee, helped build a progressive caucus in his local branch of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU). In addition to the Labor Committee's work with postal workers, early on they supported a library worker's fight against job discrimination, servitex laundry workers fighting for a union, and the fight at Hardwood Dimension Mill in Fremont.[178] Moreover, the Labor Committee of the RBUF also "held workers' solidarity activities, showed films, [and] sponsored educational meetings."[179]

When the Workers Know Your Rights Conference took place in Fremont at the end of 1982, the RBUF supported it and eight workers from Raleigh attended. Laughinghouse, living in Raleigh but spending most of his time in the East for work and helping build the Fair Labor Support Committee and the BWFJ, met with the Raleigh workers after the conference and they formed the Workers Right and Action Committee (WRAC), an affiliate of BWFJ. Simultaneously, the Labor Committee put out a call for the building of a labor organization in Raleigh. As separate organizations, WRAC and the Labor Committee sponsored a Workers: Know Your Rights Conference in Raleigh on April 23, 1983, that allowed workers from different workplaces and industries in Raleigh to come together, collectively strategize, and learn from each other. Out of the successful conference, an important development took place. On May 14th, 1983, the WRAC and the Labor Committee merged into a rank-and-file workers

[178] "Reinstate Diane Payne! End Job Discrimination," Justice Speaks, July 1983, 1-4; "Librarian Continues Fight For Job Back," *The Carolinian*, October 17, 1983, 1; "Firing due to bias, ex-worker says," *The News and Observer*, February 28, 1982, 27A.
[179] "Raleigh Workers Unite to Develop the Unity and Fighting Capacity of Workers Against the Bosses and their System of Exploitation," document in possession of author.

organization, keeping the name WRAC. Among them were "mechanic shop workers, pharmaceutical workers, medical workers, postal workers, unemployed workers, legal service workers, utility workers and social service workers." The newly established organization made sure that it was known that the meeting on May 14th "did not give birth to an organization that was simply declared without having any experience or history of practice."[180] This merger also connected the Raleigh work more closely to the BWFJ organizing program.

The newly formed WRAC focused its attention on a number of campaigns, but its first major campaign was building a workers committee and support movement for employees at a local nursing home. Hillhaven Nursing Home in Raleigh employed around sixty-five workers who were majority Black and majority women. While the workers were underpaid, their reason for organizing was because of the working conditions and lack of investment in patient care.[181] Management refused to hire enough staff to adequately run its facility, workers did not get paid for overtime, the work was so overwhelming workers had to for-go breaks and times to eat, and they had to work with faulty equipment. The WRAC helped workers meet and organize themselves, developed educational materials for the community detailing why supporting Hillhaven workers was important, held informational pickets, and reached out to unionized workers in private healthcare to support its organizing efforts.

Around the same time of the Hillhaven struggle, WRAC was expressing solidarity with rank-and-file worker in the Communication Workers of America, and hosting educational events on Affirmative Action, jobs, slavery in NC, and a range of different topics. At an educational event organized at the Young Missionary AME Church, two workers from Carolina Power and

[180] Ibid.

[181] Workers Rights and Action Committee Press Conference, July 17, 1983, document in possession of author; "Justice for Hillhaven Workers," undated, document in possession of author.

Light Company (CP&L), the statewide energy company, attended the program expressing concerns about job discrimination. The presence of CP&L workers and their willingness to take action sparked conversation among BWFJ and WRAC leaders that resulted in building a workplace committee and taking on CP&L from a legal perspective.[182]

As WRAC was preparing to take on CP&L, major developments and shifts took place. In July of 1983, Ajamu Dillahunt was asked to join the OC of Black Workers for Justice. He had been closely related to BWFJ since its founding and did support work and was practically already a member. In a letter accepting the OC position, Dillahunt wrote that he was committed to building the BWFJ because he "believe[d] that the only road for the Afro-American people to real freedom in the U.S. is for them to exercise political power over the Black Belt territory of the South."[183] The Black Belt region of the South was where the heart of BWFJ's organizing was located. Like the political thinking of other BWFJ leaders, Dillahunt thought the working class had to lead the Black freedom struggle and "through their efforts bring all the Afro-American people to a state of real emancipation." BWFJ had not only set the foundation for the direction Dillahunt thought the movement needed to be going, but the organization also had "shown that it is a determined fighter for Black people and others to improve the conditions under which they work and live."[184] Dillahunt's recruitment to the OC brought the work in Raleigh even closer to the BWFJ program.

On the employment front, with the ongoing attacks on the budget of legal service offices, Angaza Laughinghouse left Eastern North Carolina, and in 1983, was working in Durham over the city's Affirmative Action Division. Again, using his employment in-service of moving the

[182] "Black Workers at CP&L Get Organized!: Black Workers Report," Spring 1984, 1-4; "Progress Report Submitted by the Steering Committee of the Raleigh Coalition to End Job Discrimination," August 11, 1984.
[183] Gordon (Ajamu) Dillahunt to Black Workers for Justice, June 21, 1983.
[184] Ibid.

workers movement forward, Laughinghouse used his Affirmative Action skills to aid the Black CP&L workers who were speaking up about being discriminated against in hiring practices, promotions, and being subject to racist literature. BWFJ and WRAC built a committee that empowered workers and began to do research on the company. A request was made to the U.S. Department of Labor about the Affirmative Action Data of CP&L. Their research also discovered that CP&L was receiving federal funds and by law, any company receiving federal dollars had to have an Affirmative Action plan. CP&L refused to release their data in response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) submitted by Laughinghouse. This refusal by CP&L led to the formation of a coalition of labor and community groups in Raleigh. Committed to justice for Black CP&L workers, the WRAC, the Social Concerns Committee of the Young Missionary Church, BWFJ, Rev. Pickett of Wendell Baptist Church, union activist, and the NAACP formed the Raleigh Coalition to End Job Discrimination (RCEJD). The RCEJD held press conferences, went leafleting, did media work in newspapers and on TV, sponsored a conference on job discrimination, and got thousands of signatures in support of the demand for CP&L to release its Affirmative Action Plan. Within the RCEJD, a fired CP&L worker, Carol Holder became the president of the coalition and filed a lawsuit against the company. Months later after the pressure from the community and pressure in the media, CP&L offered to rehire her but would not release information on its Affirmative Action data.[185] As a result of the organizing, CP&L was forced to pay workers for the clear examples of discrimination, but they also had to make changes to the

[185] "Progress Report Submitted by the Steering Committee of the Raleigh Coalition to End Job Discrimination"; "Workers File Law Suit: Coalition Attempts End to Job Discrimination," *The Carolinian*, May 17, 1984, 1; "Group claims CP&L guilt of racial bias," *The News and Observer*, January 25, 1984; "Coalition Makes Moves on Job Discrimination," *The Carolinian*, January 19, 1984, 1.

promotion, hiring, and transfer process of Black workers. This was a huge victory in the process of taking on CP&L.[186]

The Raleigh WRAC and BWFJ had work developing on other fronts too. In 1984, BWFJ and the WRAC took on Kamex Construction Company and the Raleigh Housing Authority. Workers had been forced to work and live in asbestos and were begging to have breathing problems. The company nor city was willing to do anything about it so BWFJ organized the workers and community to stand up for themselves adopting the slogan "Asbestos..Killing [us] in our homes and at work."[187] Also in early 1984, several major developments happened. The Dillahunts opened up their bookstore, Freedom Books, which served as a meeting place for workers and educational institution for the movement and community. Laughinghouse began to do work supporting the small community in Shiloh, North Carolina that was 95% Black and located west of Morrisville in the Research Triangle Park (RTP). Despite being surrounded by majority white towns and the quickly growing RTP having mass resources, the small Shiloh community did not have adequate sewage, water, paved roads, and were victims of unjust zoning and continued displacement. To fight, the community formed the Shiloh Coalition for Community Control and Improvement.[188] While doing this work in Shiloh, Laughinghouse met his future wife, Nathanette Mayo. Mayo would join BWFJ and her and Laughinghouse would form the Fruit of Labor Singing Ensemble as the cultural arm of the BWFJ in 1984.[189]

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[186] "Lawsuit Against CP&L Settled, But Workers' Struggle Continues," *Justice Speaks*, 1984, 8.
[187] "Your Life is Only Worth $720 to Kamex and the Government," Justice Speaks, 1984, 9; "Kamex Construction Co. and Raleigh Housing Authority is Killing Workers with Asbestos in their Homes and Workplace," Justice Speaks, September 10, 1984, 1-4.
[188] "Black Community of Shiloh needs more than Water&Sewer! Black People need Organization and Local Political Power!," *Justice Speaks*, 1984, 12.
[189] "The Fruit of Labor Singing Ensemble: Inspiring the Struggle with Freedom Songs," *Justice Speaks*, September 1987, 9.

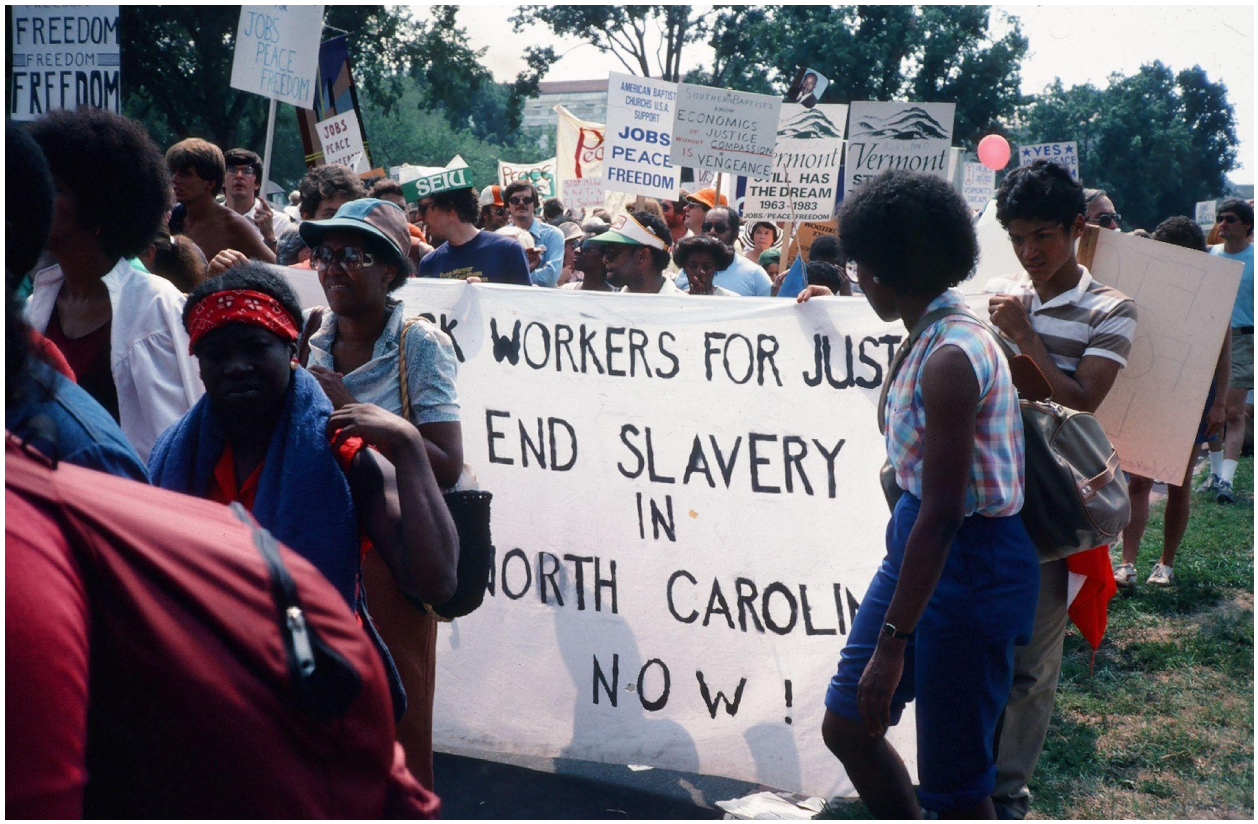

Figure 15: BWFJ Delegation at the 20th Anniversary of the March on Washington with a banner that reads “Black Workers for Justice: End Slavery in North Carolina Now!” Photo by Ajamu Dillahunt.

The work of WRAC and the workplace struggles they engaged in, has to be understood as part of and connected to the work and early development of BWFJ. Though not in the Black Belt of North Carolina it was still one of the organization’s strongest areas of work. For the 20th Anniversary of the March on Washington, Raleigh also mobilized a bus to DC and incorporated honoring Dr. King as part of its organizing program. In 1984, WRAC and BWFJ sponsored its First Annual Martin Luther King Jr. Support for Labor Banquet in Raleigh. Organizations from across the state sent their solidarity and support: Roz Pelles of the Duke Hospital Workers Grievance Committee, Cheryl Bins of the APWU, Jim Wrenn of the Wilson Local of the United Rubber Workers Union, Billy Harvey from the Concerned Citizens of Fremont, and a representative of the A Philip Randolph Institute. The keynote address was given by Saladin

Muhammad. This inaugural program was a demonstration that BWFJ was putting the infrastructure in place to build a sustained organization that operates in the best interest of the Black working class. All the base areas of BWFJ were slowly coming together and although a young organization, BWFJ was gaining respect and support for its work. The next chapter examines how BWFJ worked to bring its different base areas out of isolation from each other and into one strong organizational structure.

CHAPTER THREE: Building the Identity and Consciousness of the Black Working Class: The Workers School, Justice Speaks, the Trade Union Commission, and the Fruit of Labor Singing Ensemble

The Worker's School will not be like other schools that we know of. Most colleges and trade schools teach what they think is best for Big Business and government. And usually, people attend so they individually can do better. The Workers' School, on the other hand, will provide instruction on how to organize and fight for control of the conditions under which we labor. In other words, the school is for those of us who want everyone to do better. Other schools are sometimes for the selfish, this one will be for the selfless; other schools are for those who want to keep things the way they are, this one is for those who want to change them.[190]

Black Workers for Justice, 1985

JUSTICE SPEAKS has taken a major step in becoming the fighting news organ of the growing workers' movement in North Carolina...Through JUSTICE SPEAKS, the Black Workers for Justice will continue to reflect our tradition of fighting injustice, oppression, and demoralization within the Black Liberation Movement and people's struggles throughout the U. S. and around the world.[191]

Black Workers for Justice, 1985

New Trade Unionism suggests that all workers regardless of race, gender or nationality must be challenged to break with all the unhealthy old ways of thinking and instead take up the struggle against national oppression, or racism on the shop floor and in community life as well as struggle against male supremacy in society and sexism on the shop floor. New Trade Unionism also poses that the decision-making capacity of the rank and file must be developed and respected.[192]

Black Workers for Justice, 1986

On January 12, 1985, two hundred workers and community activists from across the state of North Carolina gathered in Raleigh for Black Workers for Justice's 2nd Annual MLK Support for Labor Banquet. For the keynote address, Ajamu Dillahunt delivered a speech titled "Government Repression, Black Liberation, and the Workers Movement." In his gray blazer, white dress shirt, and black-tie, Dillahunt reflected on Dr. King's life, uplifted his leadership in

[190] "Why a Workers School," Black Workers for Justice, 1985.
[191] "'Justice Speaks' third anniversary," Justice Speaks, September 1985, 2.
[192] "BWFJ Hold Worker Rep Seminar," *Justice Speaks*, August 1986, 3.

the fight against Jim Crow, and urged that King be remembered for his firm support for labor and economic justice. While Dillahunt believed celebrating King was important, he reminded the audience that King's commitment to Black freedom resulted in him being a victim of government surveillance and repression. Dillahunt told the audience that "for those of us who want to end exploitation and oppression, we have a special responsibility to put out one message. That is, the government hounded [Dr. King] and the racist killed him."[193] At the time of Dillahunt's speech, the national movement that won a federal holiday to honor Dr. King, was under attack. The government was trying to use their repression and surveillance of Dr. King to delegitimize him being honored through a federal holiday. Dillahunt stressed to the attendees of the banquet not to fall victim to the government and conservative attacks on Dr. King. "I would just offer a word to the wise," Dillahunt declared. When the anti-communist and personal attacks come out against the holiday for Dr. King, "your stance should be we support King whatever his political affiliations were and even if he made some mistakes in his personal life we stand with him…we have to take a stand now and be firm that we support King."[194]

Using Dr. King as a point of departure, Dillahunt continued his discussion about repression. He talked about the repression in North Carolina from the Wilmington Ten to the Charlotte Three, to Billy Harvey being threatened by the Klan and Saladin Muhammad being ran off the road in Fremont. In these examples, Dillahunt argued that the attacks and regular practice of repression were not random or extraneous, it was a direct effort to disrupt the movement for social, economic, and political progress. With this high level and targeted repression, Dillahunt did not suggest the movement be intimidated or stop its work. Instead, he encouraged the

[193] Ajamu Dillahunt, "Government Repression, Black Liberation, and the Workers Movement," recorded, January 12, 1985.
[194] Ibid.

movement to tighten up and "not let ourselves be isolated." What Dillahunt meant by not being isolated was that if a section of the movement is experiencing repression, large support needs to be mobilized for them. In a more direct way, he asserted that "what we have to do is close ranks, we've got to lock arms, and get prepared to struggle. And it is mandatory we take the offensive on the attacks on our fighters. We've got to be bold, and we have to give it everything we have, even if it means giving our lives, we gotta give it." Dillahunt was calling for a stronger movement and organizing culture to fight against repression and for a better world.

Following the keynote address by Dillahunt, Saladin Muhammad further emphasized the need for a strong organization. Muhammad expressed to the crowd that the workers movement BWFJ was building in North Carolina was a legitimate movement. BWFJ, he argued, was seeking to transform that legitimate movement into a conscious movement with a conscious leadership. By conscious, he meant a leadership and movement that thoroughly understood and was aware of the various problems confronting workers on the job, the history of worker resistance, and the central role of workers in fighting against capitalism, imperialism, and racism. As BWFJ's short history demonstrated, the organization not only identified gaps, needs, and weaknesses in the Black freedom and labor movements, they actively worked to fill the gaps and put in place structures that helped advance the movement. In the spirit of solutions and not rhetoric, Muhmmad announced that BWFJ was forming a Workers School to "produce workers who are not only determined to have a better life, but workers who understand the nature of the system that denies us a better life." One of the main priorities of the school was to get key worker leaders "to study the true nature of the system, to study the power of the working class, [and to read about] the history of the Black freedom struggle."

1985 was a big year for BWFJ. ongoining was regularly discussed in mediaThis chapter examines how BWFJ used lessons from its organizing to build a conscious and committed Black working class. The annual MLK Support for Labor Banquet was the first program BWFJ initiated to aid, honor, and be in service to the Black workers movement. But BWFJ's most mature effort to build a worker consciousness, identity and leadership was its five-month long Workers School. The Workers School gathered over fifty workers from across the state of North Carolina and had classes taught by former SNCC leader Don Stone and BWFJ's Abner Berry. In addition to exploring the Workers' School, its origins, content, and impact, this chapter also explores other institutional programs BWFJ built into its organizational structure. Several months after the Workers School, BWFJ held a retreat where they thoroughly reviewed the State of the Organization Report (SOR) written by Saladin Muhammad and put programs in place to address the challenges and shortcomings expressed in the document. Out of this retreat, BWFJ transformed the *Justice Speaks* newsletter into a fully developed newspaper, decided to form a Trade Union Commission to develop a new trade unionism, and actively worked to build a cultural arm of its organization, the Fruit of Labor Singing Ensemble. BWFJ not only used the retreat to expand its organizing, but the organization also brought individuals into its organizational structure to help its work reach its highest potential. For the *Justice Speaks* newspaper, Ashaki Binta moved to North Carolina and used her journalism skills to lead the big transition of *Justice Speaks*. Beyond the newspaper, Binta would become one of BWFJ's most important and skilled organizers.

On the national front, the labor movement in 1985 help aid some of BWFJ's organizing during its year of big growth. Beginning in 1966, The Coors Brewing Company, known for its and anti-union and discrimination, was the center of a national boycott. By 1985, the Coors

boycott was still being maintained and was regularly discussed in national media outlets. The boycott was a flex of worker and community power. As BWFJ was bringing workers together with the workers school, its newspaper, and the trade union commission it joined the call to boycotts Coors and used it as an example to show workers in North Carolina that workers and unions are fighting back. Prior to 1985, BWFJ was gaining traction in its organizing of unorganized workers and on the voting rights front, but its leaders were aware and constantly reminding themselves that their work needed to dig deeper, reach more people, and be more sustained. 1985 was the time for that.

Leading up to the transformations that would take place in 1985, the SOR was like BWFJ's bible. One of Muhammad's many suggestions in the document was for BWFJ to strengthen its Organizing Committee. For him the OC was "one of the main uniting and stimulating organs of the BWFJ." In his estimation, if BWFJ wanted "to have life as an organization, it must have functioning organs (institutions) like any other living body with different parts."[195] Muhammad maintained that "if the organs are not functioning then the organization is dying or already dead. If the organs are not functioning properly, then the organization will be deformed, slow when it needs to be fast; fast when it needs to be slow; loud when it needs to be quiet; and quiet when it needs to be loud." Simply put, "if the members of the BWFJ are not in some way consciously connected to the functioning of the organs, then they will not be stimulated to work on a single united organization."[196] At the time the Report was written (1983), BWFJ's OC had "been basically functioning as a committee to connect the activities of the different areas, instead of a committee to unite the different areas into a single

[195] "Black Workers for Justice: State of Organization Report," 15.
[196] Ibid.

organization."[197] As BWFJ sought to connect its workplace and community organizations into one organization, the Worker School, *Justice Speak*s, the Trade Union Commission, and the Fruit of Labor Singing Ensemble were core to achieving its cohesive organizational vision. Throughout the process of envisioning programs that would strengthen BWFJ's organizing and bring an identity to the Black working class, the organization continued and built on the educational, newspaper, and cultural traditions of the Black freedom, labor, and progressive movements. Following in the tradition of these movements, BWFJ was putting in place the necessary structures to consolidate its organization and provide a level of political consistency needed for the advancement of the working-class movement they were building.

The Workers School

On February 5, 1985, Saladin Muhammad sent a letter to BWFJ members, community leaders, workers, and trade union activist inviting them to the organization's Workers School. In his invitation, Muhammad expressed that the school would "be a very important experience" in the lives of those who participate. Muhammad emphasized that BWFJ's school was not like a traditional school and would have instructors who "will not talk over people's head" and "be conscious of the fact that many workers have been denied an education because they have been forced to sacrifice their schooling to work."[198] The school's instructors would "not be impatient with people asking questions about things they don't understand."[199] Philosophically, BWFJ stressed that their Workers' School rejected the individualism, selfishness, and support for big business normalized by traditional and trade schools. Instead, BWFJ adopted a pedagogical approach of empowerment in the tradition of militant labor schools, SNCC's Freedom Schools,

[197] Ibid.
[198] Saladin Muhammad to Future Worker School Participants, February 5, 1985.
[199] Ibid.

and the Highlander Center.[200] The organization also drew on the educational methodologies that were part of various African liberation struggles. BWFJ's Workers School leadership studied the educational approach of Amilcar Cabral and the PAIGC in Guinea-Bissau.[201] How BWFJ developed its school was informed and rooted in a perspective that saw education as having an instrumental role in moving humanity forward. Given its unique and liberatory approach to education, BWFJ asked participants to attend the school with an open mind, an eagerness to learn, and full commitment.

Held at the Franklinton Center at Bricks in Whitakers, North Carolina and funded by the National Community Fund and the Carolina Community Project, BWFJ mobilized over fifty workers for its first classroom session on February 16, 1985. In this stage of BWFJ's work, organizing in some counties had reached the point of inactivity, while work in other counties continued to expand. The work in Duplin and Martin County had been dormant because of limited capacity and resources. In Nash, Edgecombe, Wake, Wilson, and Wayne counties, BWFJ was able to maintain its organizing efforts and mobilize leaders from those areas to the Workers' School. Bringing together workers from a range of different industries, the first day of the Workers School started with intentional relationship building and detailed introductions. Workers were put into three working groups named after important African American freedom fighters: Mamie Greene and Sandy Smith, Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer, and the Abner Berry and Harry Haywood working groups. Once in the groups, the workers were given a partner

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[200] William Sturkey, "'I want to Become A Part of History': Freedom Summer, Freedom Schools, and Freedom News, *The Journal of African American History* 95, no. 3-4 (2010): 348-368; John Hale, The Freedom Schools: Student Activist in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016; William Sturkey and John Hale, *To Write in the Light of Freedom: The Newspapers of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2015); Stephen Preskill, *Education in Black and White: Myles Horton and the Highlander Center's Vision for Social Justice* (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 2021); John M, Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1996).
[201] Sonia Borges, *Militant Education, Liberation Struggle, Consciousness:: The PAIGC education in Guinea Bissau 1963-1978* (New York: Peter Lang, 2019).

that they had to interview and introduce to the larger group. These collective introductions brought to the surface the diversity of Black workers present at the school. In attendance were workers like: Billy Harvey from Fremont and an employee with the Rural Advancement Project for Farm Workers, Robert Smith from Rocky Mount and a sanitation worker, John Coley from Fremont and an employee at O'Berry in Goldsboro, Kathy Howell from the Carolina Community Project, Kathy from Raleigh and a Postal Worker, Melvin Mills from Wilson and an employee with Allied Maintenance/Firestone, Menever Banks from Rocky Mount and bus operator, Mildred Davis from Rocky Mount and a former Kmart worker, Catherine Muhammad Adam from Raleigh and an insurance worker, Milton Williams from Wilson and employed at Genbearco, Phillip from Raleigh and an employee at CP&L, Alexander Evans from Blooming Hill and sanitation worker in Rocky Mount, Jim Wrenn from Tarboro and a worker at Cummings Engine Plant, Katy from Whitakers and unemployed, Marshal Jones from Tarboro and a Edgecombe County employee, Naomi Greene from Rocky Mount, and Gary Banks from Rocky Mount and employed as a janitor.

Figure 16: Workers School facilitator Ajamu Dillahunt (left) in conversation with Worker School participants Jim Grant, Kathy, and Nathennette Mayo. Photo Source: The Communiversity.

After introductions, Muhammad shared remarks on "Why a Workers School." Indeed, a reason for the school being called was to bring BWFJ members together for the first time and have them see themselves as part of one organization. But the school and how BWFJ conceptualized it, served a larger purpose. Muhammad explained that one of the school's main objectives was to expand the consciousness, worldview, and organizing skills of Black workers. BWFJ held the view that when Black workers are organized and able to express their power, it improves the conditions of all workers. The employer, Muhammad highlighted, "will not teach us how to organize our power." BWFJ's Workers School, on the other hand, was designed to teach workers how to utilize their power to create a fair, democratic, and just society. Part of the young BWFJ's thought process when forming the school was to provide an environment that "train[ed] the workers who do not have the money to pay thousands of dollars in the universities to learn." BWFJ believed that workers had the "right to know all that can be known about a society, how to rule a society, how to make that society fair and just whether you have the money

to pay for an education or not."[202] In sum, the Workers School aimed to help workers determine what they were fighting for and what they were against through an intellectually rigorous, practical, and relatable pedagogical approach. Workers were also in an environment that had full confidence in them. Going into the school, BWFJ felt that "just as workers have mastered the techniques of production in the mills and plants or skills in the service industry, they can master all of the skills necessary for organizing and leadership."[203]

Throughout the school's seven classes, workers were exposed to a wide range of information, strategies, and resources. Participants were shown "Finally Got the News," a documentary about the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the aggressive struggle they waged in in United Auto Workers Union and Detroit's auto-industry in the late 1960s.[204] Students were also shown the film Fundi that captured the legacy and important contributions of Ella Baker, a longtime freedom fighter and one of SNCC's most important mentors.[205] Don Stone, with his experience in SNCC and organizing freedom schools in Atlanta to "teach Black history that was not covered in students' normal curriculum," led a class on the roots of oppression.[206] Stone gave a presentation that stressed to the students that if they wanted to understand why inequality was so widespread in the 1980s, they had to understand the economic history of the United States and the Black experience. Stone discussed slavery and its role in shaping capitalism, the Civil War and Reconstruction, capitalism's relationship to the U.S.

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[202] Saladin Muhammad, "Why a Workers School," February 16, 1985.
[203] "Why a Workers School," 1985.
[204] Marvin Surkin and Dan Georgakas, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012); James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
[205] Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker And The Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
[206] "Don Stone," SNCC Digital Gateway, SNCC Legacy Project and Duke University, https://snccdigital.org/people/donald-stone/.

South, attacks on Affirmative Action, Black land loss, and a range of other themes related to the African American historical experience.[207]

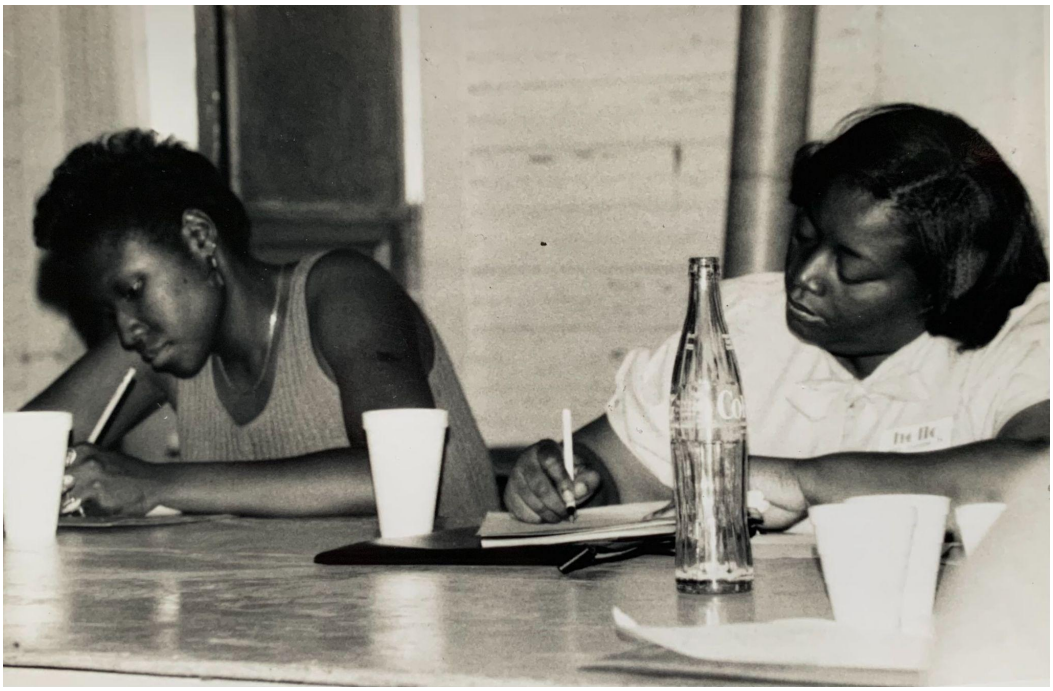

Figure 17: Worker School participants taking detailed notes during a presentation at the school sessions held at the Franklinton Center at Bricks. Photo Source: The Communiversity.

Attorney Travis Payne, who had been a director at Legal Services of North Carolina, an active member of the WRAC, and leader in the National Lawyers Guild, taught a class on "Organizing and the Law." In his presentation, Payne unpacked the origins of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and discussed how companies used it as a union-busting tactic. As part of his discussion on the NLRA (also known as the Wagner Act), Payne deemed it the most radical legislation passed by the United States Congress. The Wagner Act "guarantee[ed] wage earners for the first time the right to bargain collectively and the right to strike."[208] In Payne's estimation,

[207] Saladin Muhammad to Donald Stone, February 5, 1985, 1-3.

[208] Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais, *Labor's Untold Story: The Adventure Story of the Battles, Betrayals and Victories of American Working Men and Women* (Pittsburgh, PA: United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America, 1979); Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

the Act represented "a possibility, a promise, of a redistribution of power."[209] Payne further argued that the NLRA was not passed because of the goodwill of Congress, the militant action of workers forced Congress and Franklin D. Roosevelt to sign the NLRA into law. When the NLRA became law, employers with the support of the police, violated the new law and tried to continue its union busting. Workers, however, "made the employers obey that law." With the "imaginative, courageous, and united efforts of countless workers," Payne informed school participants that "an incredible wave of strikes" took place that forced the boss to respect the workers' collective power.[210]

While Payne encouraged workers in the 1980s to utilize the hard-fought legislation, he felt that workers should also be mindful of the NLRA's limitations. For Payne, the law had to be understood as being an instrument in service of maintaining the status-quo in society. In the case of the Wagner Act, the status-quo in the United States was using the law in a way that benefited big business and corporations. According to Payne, before the NLRA could reach its full potential, the Supreme Court undermined its power. Two years after the NLRA was passed and workers taking advantage of it, the courts began to make amendments to NLRA that undermined its usefulness to workers. The supreme court made sit-down strikes illegal, put in place amendments that allowed employers to permanently replace striking workers, and limited what workers could organize around. As a lawyer, Payne's main message to the workers was to not rely on the law to receive long-term justice in the workplace, but to rely on their strength through organizing. That is, individual employment claims or lawsuits are relevant, but Payne believed that they would not lead to long-term structural change. Payne was not discouraging workers

[209] Travis Payne, "Organizing and the Law," February 16, 1985.
[210] Ibid.

from taking legal action, but he was informing them that as the NLRA stood in the 1980s, employers were given a lot of power to mistreat workers and prevent their collective power.

Beyond the grounding in history, the economy, law, and important theoretical points, the Workers' School offered participants practical skills. There were class sessions on how to organize a meeting, how to develop a leaflet, how to develop a shop newsletter, how to hold a press conference, how to talk to the media, and how to address challenges in workplace organizing. Through a participatory format, the school encouraged and created an environment for workers to share their thoughts with a large group and develop their public speaking skills. BWFJ also incorporated role playing and gave workers guidance on how to combat problems they were experiencing on the job. For one hands-on activity, BWFJ had workers break out into groups and answer questions that helped them talk through problems at their specific workplace. Participants were asked to think about obstacles in trying to organize their co-workers and possible solutions to overcome the fear of organizing. For homework assignments, BWFJ offered hands-on activities. As part of its participation in a campaign with the National Unemployment Network and to help workers get experience putting together a leaflet, workers were asked to develop and distribute a leaflet on extending unemployment benefits. Included in the workshop on "Organizing in Community and Workplace," BWFJ had school participants help lead local chapter meetings in between school sessions.

At the end of the five-month school, BWFJ had accomplished its goal of providing workers with an educational experience that connected theory and practice. To celebrate, BWFJ held a banquet where workers received certificates for their competition of the school. After receiving their certificate, workers who attended the school were able to share their remarks. In an article published in *Justice Speaks* about the banquet, BWFJ felt that workers wanting to

speak in front of a crowd was a step in the right direction. Before starting the school, some workers were scared to speak in front of a small group. Now they were speaking in front of dozens of people. In the *Justice Speaks* article reflecting on the school and the banquet, BWFJ maintained that an "important outcome was [the] identification of new and capable leaders" who should be understood as "working-class intellectuals."[211] Though the workers did not have "training in the colleges and universities of the elites." It was felt by BWFJ that "their performance at the school showed that they are intellectuals in their own right."[212] Moreover, BWFJ concluded that "the Afro-American freedom movement and the working-class struggle in N.C. has received a significant boost because of the School. It is now our task to make sure this can be translated into new opportunities and victories."[213]

BWFJ knew that its first Workers' School would not be its last. The organization got to work on making the workers school a permanent and consistent education institution. The Workers School would soon develop into one of BWFJ's most important and useful institutions. To demonstrate its commitment to the Workers School project long term, BWFJ organized a Board of Directors for the School. The Board was composed of leaders from BWFJ, the Puerto Rican Labor Task Force, the Center for Constitutional Rights, the Afro-American Education Center, Southerners for Economic Justice, and representatives from local unions and worker organizations. The Board and BWFJ saw the Workers School as "a repository of working-class history with emphasis on Black workers and includes a library of books, important documentation, film, and videos."[214] BWFJ was not only a workers' organization that was

[211] "Banquet Marks End of Workers School," Justice Speaks, September 1985, 5.
[212] Ibid., 7.
[213] Ibid.
[214] "Workers School Board of Directors," Black Workers for Justice, October 26, 1986.

building power in the workplace and in the community, but they were also working-class educators and intellectuals.

Justice Speaks: A Voice for the Black Worker

On October 26, 1985, four months after its successful workers' school, BWFJ's OC held a retreat to "'tighten up..[its] ranks as new fighters come forward."[215] In preparation for the big meeting, members were asked to review the State of the Organization Report. The main reason OC members were asked to read the SOR was because it offered an assessment on how to improve BWFJ's weaknesses and maintain its strengths. One topic discussed in the report and that was on the retreat's agenda was the *Justice Speaks* newsletter. In the SOR, Muhammad described *Justice Speaks* as being the glue of BWFJs work. If the organization did not have a functioning paper, its membership would feel disconnected from each other and there would be no concentrated effort to capture "the growing sentiment of Black workers struggling against their sufferings."[216] The SOR further argued that not having *Justice Speaks* would cause BWFJ members and other workers to continue to have their worldview shaped by the mainstream, and corporation owned media. Muhammad recommended that BWFJ "get out a regular monthly *Justice Speaks*" to combat the power-structure's propaganda.[217]

For three years, *Justice Speaks* played a large role in the Kmart struggle, the fight against the Hardwood Dimensions Mill in Fremont, Perdue Chicken in Martin County, job discrimination at CP&L in Wake County, and countless other workplace and community struggles. At the same time, *Justice Speaks* was not published on a consistent basis. At first it was a one-page newsletter, then transitioned to a two-page newsletter, and for a couple of issues

[215] Angaza Laughinghouse to the Organizing Committee of Black Workers for Justice, September 11, 1985.
[216] "Black Workers for Justice: State of Organization Report," 14.
[217] Ibid.

in 1984 *Justice Speaks* became a nine-page newsletter. Going into the 1985 retreat, BWFJ wanted to increase the usefulness and consistency of *Justice Speaks*. The organization decided to transition the newsletter into a fully developed newspaper. BWFJ's vision for the role a newspaper can play in the workers movement and the struggle for Black liberation, had two main inspirations. BWFJ's reference point on the power of a newsletter in a workplace struggle took inspiration from the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. On top of that, Abner Berry, one of BWFJ's founders and mentors, had over three decades of journalism experience, writing for the Communist Party U.S.A's newspaper, *The Daily Worker* from 1942-1957 and at the United Nations until the 1970s.

To lead the process of taking *Justice Speaks* to the next stage, BWFJ recruited Ashaki Binta. Binta studied journalism at Valparaiso University and was inspired by Black journalists who wrote in service of the movement for Black freedom. Binta's move to North Carolina in 1985 was important because she not only had journalism skills, but she was also a union organizer and member of the African People's Party with Naeema and Saladin Muhammad. Her union organizing was with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and in the APP, she was an advocate for the Party shifting its concentration to Black workers and building a Black labor support committee. In 1977, she wrote a paper titled, "On Direction of Party Cadre Toward Black Workers."[218] Binta encouraged her comrades in the APP to not only identify as revolutionary nationalist, but also as trade unionists. She believed that because Black workers were concentrated in key industries in the US economy, trade unions had to be strategically used in order to achieve Black liberation. Binta believed trade unions were so important that they needed to be valued in the African American community like churches are. Binta also told her

[218] Ashaki Binta, "On Direction of Party Cadre Toward Black Workers," 1977.

comrades in the APP that the logical and necessary focus on Black workers in the United States, had to be geographically located in the South. Simply put, everything BWFJ was doing on the organizational level, Binta had long agreed with.

Given how closely she identified with BWFJ's political program, when she got to North Carolina in 1985, she jumped right into the work. For the retreat, Binta submitted a comprehensive report that illuminated the purpose of the *Justice Speaks* newspaper and its significance to journalism in the 1980s. In her report, Binta argued that the mainstream US media and newspapers serve the ruling class and "distort or suppress the truth and practice ruthless exploitation."[219] The left, or "progressive" media like the Guardian and Frontline, in her view, were good sources of information about freedom movements in the U.S. and across the world. But Binta argued that being a left publication only focused on information, prevented those newspapers from reaching their full potential. *Justice Speaks* would be something different from existing newspapers. Binta stressed that *Justice Speaks* was "the voice, hope, and organizer of the Black workers movement."[220] Through its paper, BWFJ sought to not only be objective and provide accurate information to workers, the organization considered *Justice Speaks* "a program based paper" of BWFJ and a newspaper "tied to a [Black working class] base."[221] That is, *Justice Speaks* was part of a political perspective that encouraged political action and opposed neutrality. Binta's report asserted that "justice speaks takes a definitive position" and "sides with the Black liberation movement."[222]

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[219] Ashaki Binta, Report on Justice Speaks, October 1985, 1.
[220] Ibid.
[221] Ibid.
[222] Ibid., 1-2.

In this new era of *Justice Speaks*, BWFJ made clear its intended target and how it wanted to present the newspaper's content. *Justice Speaks'* primary target was workers and communities in Eastern North Carolina who were not only isolated from each other but were experiencing "information oppression" and only had access to white controlled media outlets. To put its liberatory approach to journalism into action, BWFJ planned to publish three types of articles: organizing, agitational, and analysis/information. The organizing articles would highlight the workplace and community struggles that BWFJ was part of, the agitational articles would be where BWFJ takes a position on an issue, and the analysis/information articles would be interpretation or exposing the readership to different topics and themes.[223] It was Binta's hope that through *Justice Speaks*, BWFJ could situate its work as part of an international movement and expose its readership to liberation movements across the world.

BWFJ did not just reimagine and articulate a vision for a newspaper that served the movement, they built one. For the vision and aims for *Justice Speaks* to come to life, BWFJ needed a structure. Funded by a grant from the National Community Fund, BWFJ purchased equipment to produce *Justice Speaks* and divided the governing and day-to-day operations of the newspaper into four parts: editorial board, staffing, distribution, and sales/finances. While the main decisions about *Justice Speaks* were made by BWFJ's OC, the editorial board was responsible for reviewing articles for publication, keeping the paper aligned with its political commitments, and leading *Justice Speaks* institutional development. Staff were responsible for editing, layout, typing, design, and distribution. The distribution part of *Justices Speaks* was to target the main counties of BWFJ organizing and to develop a plan to reach a general

[223] Ibid., 2.

audience.[224] When the first issue of *Justice Speaks* as a newspaper came out, BWFJ printed 1,000 copies and sold roughly 700 copies (300 in the Raleigh area, 400 in eastern North Carolina). The paper was of clear interest to workers in the region.

JUSTICE SPEAKS

newspaper of the

BLACK WORKERS FOR JUSTICE

VOL. 3 NO. 1 SEPT. 85 .25

DISCRIMNATION AT FIRESTONE

BLACK COMMUNITY

DEPRIVED OF $1 MILLION

The Firestone Tire and Rubber Company in Wilson, N.C., has a maintenance contractor, Allied Maintenance Company, that is practicing job discrimination against black workers in hiring and promotions.

In April, an Allied supervisor (white) called a black worker "nigger". While he was later fired because of pressure from the local union IAM 2541 led by its black members, the problems of racism at the Firestone plant go deeper than racist name calling.

Allied Maintenance employs about 200 workers, 149 mechanics and 50 janitorial. Mechanics are the highest paid, earning between $25,000 and $30,000 yearly. Of the 149 mechanics only 15 are black. The janitorial workers earn an average of $10,000 yearly. Of the 50 janitorial workers only 4 are white.

The population of Wilson County is about 40% black. The neighboring counties of Edgecombe and Greene, within Allied's hiring area have populations over 50% black. Using the Wilson County figure alone, Allied should be employing at least 50 black mechanics out of the 149.

By denying at least 35 mechanic jobs to black workers, Allied is actually depriving the black community of over $1 million in income each year. Thus making the problem of job discrimination against black workers at the Firestone plant a problem which negatively affects the development and progress of the black community; housing improvements, college educations, medical needs, neighborhood development, food, clothing, school supplies go lacking because of this loss of income to black families.

Firestone refuses to take actions to make its' contractor, Allied, end its' discriminatory practices. In fact, in a letter to the union, Firestone states, that it has no knowledge of Allied's discrimination against black workers. Either Firestone officials are colorblind or they are actively condoning Allied's racism.

Several black workers have filed EEOC charges of job discrimination against Allied. A letter was sent by the union to Firestone Chief Engineer, Ed Burnett, calling on him to take some affirmative action to resove this problem. Copies of the letter went out to over 30 community groups, churches, elected officials, unions and newspapers. This approach of involving and mobilizing community forces was used to help apply pressure that led to the firing of the name-calling supervisor.

Firestone is currently faced with a union organizing drive by the United Rubber Workers Union (URW), and is clearly trying to soft peddle this issue in hopes that it won't influence more workers to join the union.

If the URW is smart, it will soon find a way of making the issue of job discrimination a key part of its' organizing drive.

This struggle against job discrimination may have some expected difficulties, which hopefully can be overcome by an active union membership united around just and effective demands, under the leadership of its' black members.

continued on p.7

Inside the SPEAKS

Figure 18: BWFJ's first issue of *Justice Speaks* as a Newspaper that had the struggle at Firestone and Allied Maintenance. The first issue also included articles on the National Educators Association, Black Labor and Apartheid, the Reagan Administration, and Black Farmers.

Content wise, BWFJ stayed true to the guidelines and political objectives it set for the newspaper. When *Justice Speaks* first became a newspaper, BWFJ had been organizing workers against job discrimination. The fight against job discrimination and for Affirmative Action had been won at CP&L in Raleigh, now BWFJ was fighting job discrimination in Eastern North

[224] Ibid., 3.

Carolina at the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company located in Wilson, NC. Firestone, through a contract with the Allied Maintenance Company, hired its mechanics and janitors. Workers at Allied Maintenance Company were unionized through the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM). When one of Allied Maintenance's supervisors in Wilson called a Black employee "nigger," Black workers in the union took initiative and got the supervisor fired. On the front page of its first issue as a newspaper, *Justice Speaks* highlighted the incident and praised the response of the Black workers.[225] Though the Black workers waged a successful fight against racism, the article made clear that the struggle was not over and "the problems of racism at the Firestone plant go deeper than racist name calling."[226] Following what the organization laid out in its vision for a newspaper, BWFJ's article published on Allied Maintenance was not neutral, took a position, and sided with the workers. The *Justice Speaks* article revealed that Allied Maintenance had 149 mechanics (highest paid) and 50 janitors (lowest paid) in the Wilson branch of Firestone. For Black employees, only 15 were mechanics and over 30 were janitors. *Justice Speaks*, through its investigative journalism, argued that since Black people made up 40% of Wilson County where Firestone was located, they should be "at least 50 black mechanics out of the 149." To take it even further, *Justice Speaks* found that Black workers being denied promotions and jobs as mechanics is "depriving the black community of over $1 million in income each year."[227] Like BWFJ had done with other campaigns, it used *Justice Speaks* to show how the problems impacting workers was something that impacted the entire Black community on the educational, health care, housing, food, and development front.

[225] "Discrimination at Firestone: Black Community Deprived of $1 Million," *Justice Speaks*, September 1985, 1.
[226] Ibid.
[227] Ibid.

Justice Speaks was consistent. The newspaper did not stop reporting on the struggle at Firestone after one article, it followed the entire struggle, its demands, and outcome. *Justice Speaks* reported on the job discrimination complaint filed by fifteen Firestone workers to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the intense contract negotiations IAM was preparing to have with Allied Maintenance. BWFJ was working closely with the union's Black membership to have Affirmative Action be part of its contract negotiations.[228] According to *Justice Speaks*, the IAM formed a Human Rights Committee to further examine and find solutions to the issues of job discrimination. *Justice Speaks* published the Affirmative Action plan that the committee developed and was fighting for. The plan called for changes in employment, promotions, training, and supervisor behavior.[229]

At this stage of the Allied Maintenance struggle, *Justice Speaks* continued to take a position and give suggestions to the workers. While IAM was preparing for contract negotiations, *Justice Speaks* urged them to not compromise and be firm in its demand. IAM had proposed in the negotiations that the different classification of mechanics be combined into one. This was proposed by the IAM because removing the classification system of mechanics would eliminate Allied Mechanic's racist and unfair promotion practices. Management rejected the proposal and instead recommended that "the current contract language requiring promotions to be based on seniority and qualifications, be dropped." BWFJ immediately urged the workers not to accept management's proposal. If they did, "it would be like committing trade union

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[228] "Allied 15 Against Discrimination, Struggle Continues at Firestone," *Justice Speaks*, October 1985, 1; "I.A.M. Rally at Bend of Road," *Justice Speaks*, October 1985, 2. This is important because at the time, the Reagan administration was waging a strong attack against Affirmative Action. BWFJ believed that if the union were to take up the battle for Affirmative Action that it represents a big step forward for the labor movement, and a very special meaning about the role and need for a union like Local 2541. The Wilson union had the opportunity to set the tone for the entire labor movement.

[229] "Allied Workers Propose Affirmative Action Plan," *Justice Speaks*, November 1985, 1-2.

suicide."[230] Without the IAM's mechanic classification proposal, management's proposal would prevent workers from filling grievances on job promotions. Grievances and the threat of them had been the only method that Black workers used to get promotions. If there was no grievance system, the recommendations and possibility for Affirmative Action would be undermined. *Justice Speaks* argued that "If Allied is unwilling to budge, than the workers must also be unwilling to budge."

The contract negotiations resulted in the IAM agreeing to the company's proposal that limited workers' ability to file a grievance. Though the IAM did not take BWFJ's recommendation and abandoned the Affirmative Action plan of its Black members, BWFJ and *Justice Speaks* continued to support the workers at Firestone. Before the negotiations, 15 Black workers filed charges with the EEOC who after the negotiations still had the legal right to conduct its investigation. In *Justice Speaks,* BWFJ exposed how Allied Maintenance was refusing to comply with the investigation and would not provide the EEOC with records on its policy and history of promotions. In *Justice Speaks*, BWFJ urged the Black union members to keep organizing and fighting until the problem is resolved. When the negotiations with the union were over, Allied Maintenance granted 10 promotions, all to white employees. The struggle being led by Black workers began to take their battle to the county level and challenge the role of the Wilson Employment Office. At every stage of the workers struggle, BWFJ and *Justice Speaks* was right there reporting, investigating, analyzing, and organizing.

How *Justice Speaks* covered the struggle at Firestone is an example of how in theory and in practice, *Justice Speaks* was used as a tool to build worker power and empower the Black working class. But BWFJ did not stop there. BWFJ did more than build a revolutionary

[230] "IAM Contract Talks Hot and Heavy," *Justice Speaks*, November 1985, 5.

newspaper, the organization also brought a black working-class perspective to other major forms of media of that time. One year after converting *Justice Speaks* into a newspaper, BWFJ established Justice Speaks Radio that was broadcast through Shaw University's radio station, 89.9. In his proposal for the program, Ajamu Dillahunt defined the purpose of the radio program was to "to bring to listeners news and information related to the workplace, such as wages; hours, working conditions and health and safety."[231] The radio program would also "deal with Black concerns in the broader political and social arena."[232] Justice Speaks Radio would cover topics that explored "Electoral politics, racist violence, drugs, and apartheid." In the first few programs that aired, Dillahunt covered topics of Black workers experiencing racism at a Pepsi cola plant in Jacksonville, North Carolina and Black firefighters fighting racism in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The Justice Speaks Radio segment played music by Bob Marley and included spoken word and poetry as part of its thirty-minute program.

Trade Union Commission

At the October 1985 retreat, BWFJ dedicated time to reflect on and improve its trade union activity. The State of the Organization Report that all OC members were required to read, included an honest analysis of the trade union movement in the United States and how it relates to BWFJ's work. The report found that "from 1974 to 1980," unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO lost close to four million of its members. According to the report, the large decrease in union membership was not only because of the anti-union attacks from elected officials and corporations. Muhammad (the author of the report) argued that international unions were to also blame for the large drop in union membership. In contract negotiations, Muhammad maintained,

[231] Black Workers for Justice, "Proposal for Community Affairs Program," undated.
[232] Ibid.

"the leading officials of most major union[s] end up siding with the position of the Corporations or making concessions while encouraging the workers to accept these cuts without a fight."[233] Beyond negotiations, the report argued that unions also failed its members based on its top-down and undemocratic structure. For the most part, "many union officials do things to prevent the rank-and-file union members from having effective input into union decisions."[234] At the time, major unions failed to develop any commitment to racial justice and women's rights. For BWFJ, the lack of representation of people of color and rank and file decision making in unions was an issue that had an impact on all workers but especially Black workers in the Black Belt South. Still, BWFJ emphasized that they were pro-union but against unions who disregard the rank and file and Black workers. In their viewpoint, the trend toward business unionism was destroying the effectiveness and usefulness of the trade union movement. Something had to change.

Like it did with *Justice Speaks*, BWFJ did more than critique the shortcomings of the trade union movement, they implemented solutions to help strengthen it. During the retreat, because of the failures and limitations of trade unions that BWFJ identified, it was proposed that the organization form a Trade Union Commission (TUC). As a worker's organization that was mainly focused on building power in the workplace to transform the larger society, a trade union strategy was indispensable for BWFJ. With North Carolina having the lowest union density rates in the country, BWFJ justified its initiation of the TUC in the reality that "North Carolina lacks an active trade union movement."[235] Having an inactive trade union movement prevented unity among the workers and gave the corporations the opportunity to normalize its anti-worker propaganda. BWFJ argued that the way trade unions conducted themselves in North Carolina

[233] "Black Workers for Justice: State of Organization Report," 3-4.
[234] Ibid.
[235] Black Workers for Justice, "Proposal: Trade Unions and Workplace Concentration," 1985, 1.

created an environment where trade unions were not seen as legitimate or useful worker organizations. According to BWFJ, trade unions in North Carolina did not host social functions that positioned them as more than workplace organizations. Trade unions in North Carolina were also disconnected from the successes and gains made by rank-and-file workers across the country who were making strides on democratic decision-making, Black leadership, and the struggle against unemployment.

Another reason BWFJ formed the TUC was because "trade unions have not been actively trying to organize the South."[236] From BWFJ's experience, when trade unions did engage in union drives in the South, it was lazy and not strategic. At the time, unions would compete to organize the same plant and give more ammunition to the bosses and disempower the workers. Efforts by unions to organize a plant were oftentimes isolated, lacked community support, and under resourced. Even though North Carolina had one of the lowest union density rates in the country, it had a statewide union federation, the NC AFL-CIO. BWFJ formed the TUC because it considered The Central Labor Unions (CLUs) in different parts of North Carolina to be weak. The CLUs were under the leadership of the NC AFL-CIO and lacked any substantive rank-and-file participation in the CLUs. As members of a local CLU, BWFJ observed that workers in local unions that were part of the CLUs would not be aware of the decisions and campaigns decided on by the local council. Decisions for the CLUs were made by the leadership of the statewide AFL-CIO not the rank and file it was in service to.

Arguably the top reason BWFJ formed the TUC was that "the Black working class" was "not an organized force within the trade union framework in the area."[237] In North Carolina, the

[236] Ibid.
[237] Ibid., 2.

A. Phillip Randolph Institute was the NC AFL-CIO's go-to Black trade union organization. While Randolph was an admired and respected trade union leader, BWFJ believed the organization created in his honor and tasked with continuing his legacy was not providing the necessary leadership for Black workers in the state. As part of its assessment, BWFJ maintained that the A. Phillip Randolph Institute was not "a rank-and-file organization" and was not "connected to the non-unionized Black worker." Being that the unionization rate of Black workers in the state was so low, not being connected to Black workers outside of the existing union structure was overlooking a large portion of Black workers in the state. The A. Phillip Randolph Institute, BWFJ surmised, refused to take bold positions or "rock the boat on issues for the union to take up, including issues of Affirmative Action."[238] The TUC would be bold and do all it could to fill in the gaps and failures of the existing trade union movement in North Carolina and across the country.

Though BWFJ agreed to form the TUC in 1985, the TUC did not organize its first meeting until 1986. In an announcement published in *Justice Speaks*, to address the weaknesses BWFJ diagnosed in the trade union movement, the TUC dedicated itself to five main objectives. The objectives for BWFJ's TUC was: organizing strong unions where none exist with a program against racism and sexism, fighting for rank-and-file activism on the workplace floor in every department and on every shift, fighting for rank-and-file democracy and control in existing unions, fight for trade unions to become an active and visible part of the communities of their memberships and on issues that affect workers in society, and making unionizing the Black Belt South, a main component in the strategy for achieving Black political power, workers' rights and

[238] Ibid.

Black National liberation.[239] These objectives supported BWFJ's belief that as workers organizations, trade unions "have to be governed by the rank and file membership if they are to be more effective."[240] Since its founding, BWFJ has been guided by the principle of a rank-and-file structure. Not long after the announcement in *Justice Speaks*, BWFJ's TUC published *New Trade Unionism: A Bold Vision for Labor* that clarified its vision for a new type of trade unionism.[241] The new trade unionism that the organization developed objectives for and was advocating for, was not conceptualized from a theory they read about or an opinion from one of its members. Rather, BWFJ wanted to emphasize that the TUC was formed and guided by a practice of rank-and-file trade union organizing throughout North Carolina that they were directly involved in. *New Trade Unionism* included articles of rank-and-file workers that BWFJ had relationships with who were waging a struggle on the shop floor at Consolidated Diesel Company in Whitakers, Rocky Mount Undergarment in Rocky Mount, Emhart Company in Durham, Firestone in Wilson, and Genbearco in Wilson.

The article on Genbearco is a good example of BWFJ's vision for a new type of trade unionism. Since 1983, workers at Genbearco had been waging what BWFJ described as a "protracted struggle." Meaning, the fight was long-term and experienced ups and downs and defeats and victories. Genbearco arrived in Wilson in 1969 and made steel products as part of the auto industry. After about a decade (in 1983), workers organized a union drive with the United Auto Workers Union but lost by sixteen votes. The union drive at Genbearco showed that there was a commitment from its workers to fight for better pay, working conditions, and respect on the job. A few months after the union drive, in 1984, Genbearco applied for a four-million-dollar

[239] "TUC Organizes A New 'New Trade Unionism,'" *Justice Speaks*, 1986, 3.
[240] Ibid.
[241] Black Workers for Justice, *New Trade Unionism: A Bold Vision for Labor* (Rocky Mount, NC, 1986).

industrial revenue bond with Wilson County that sought to hire more workers at the plant but pay them wages less than the county average. Those workers who were pro-union, immediately opposed the company's proposal. They organized and demanded that if the company receives the bond that they be forced to pay the county average. As part of their organizing efforts, the workers organized support in the community and initiated the Wilson County Coalition for Jobs and Fair Wages. The workers and the coalition it formed called for the county wage requirement to be enforced and that the county hold a public hearing on the company's request.[242] Genbearco opposed the public hearing and withdrew its application for the industrial bond. The Genbearco workers may not have won the union drive, but they won a huge victory against the company and its effort to under-pay workers. This was also considered a victory of workers because it activated a confident core of workers ready to fight against the company.[243]

Indeed, defeating the low pay proposed by the company was a huge victory for the workers, but it was short-lived. The company fired some of the workers that had been leaders in opposition to the industrial revenue bond. When these workers were fired "a period of fear among the workers set in."[244] At the same time, there remained two workers at Genbearco who did not want to give-in and started working with BWFJ. Milton Williams and Mattie Brown had plans to "renew the struggle" at the plant and got from BWFJ the necessary skills to do that. In 1985, BWFJ facilitated the two workers' involvement in the AFL-CIO's Right to Know Law campaign. Williams got petition signatures from his co-workers and recruited four workers from Genbearco into the campaign. Brown had been fired because of respiratory issues she developed on the job but was still committed to fighting the company. Both Williams and Brown also

[242] "Firm withdraws bid for industrial bonds," *The News and Observer*, May 12, 1984, 24.
[243] "Another Round of Protracted Struggle at Genbearco," in *New Trade Unionism: A Bold Vision for Labor* (Rocky Mount, NC, 1986), 4.
[244] Ibid., 5.

attended BWFJ's Workers School and were able to converse with and strategize with other workers.

Figure 19: Milton Williams at BWFJ's Workers School in 1985 a few months after his firing from Genbearco in Wilson, North Carolina. Photo Source: The Communiversity.

One month after the completion of the Workers' School, Williams gathered a group of committed workers where they "decided the time was right for a renewed organization effort."[245] As the workers were figuring out their strategy on how to reignite their organizing efforts, word had gotten to management and they fired Williams and another worker, William Nowlin. The excuse the company gave for firing Williams was that he was "operating his machine without oil."[246] A weak and untrue accusation from the Genbearco management (they tried to fire him

[245] Ibid., 6.
[246] Ibid.

months ago for the same reason), Williams and other workers fired for union activity decided they were going to take a stand. The core group of workers Williams was able to mobilize after the last firings had dissolved and "fear again set in." Not deterred or discouraged, Williams and two of his co-workers met and put out a strategic and explanatory leaflet. The leaflet, that he learned how to make at the Workers School, concisely connected the firing of Williams and pro-union workers to the workers who were laid off by Genbearco and had their jobs sent to Israel. By putting out the leaflet, the workers got a positive response from their co-workers and called for a workers speak out. Having mobilized dozens of workers from Genbearco who were ready to fight back against unjust firings and layoffs, the speak out resulted in workers forming a shop-newspaper that they called *The General: Inside and Out*. The worker's newspaper was created to challenge and oppose the misinformation getting to workers from the company newspaper, *Inside the General.*

In addition to the newsletter, the workers took legal action and won a huge victory. Williams filed for unemployment and other employees filed charges with the NC Human Relations Department. As part of his filing for unemployment, Williams was granted an unemployment hearing and planned to use it to object to his firing. The workers newsletter called on workers to support Williams at his hearing (which they did) that went on for six hours. Despite it being a long hearing, the unemployment committee ruled in favor of Williams. His victory symbolized a huge defeat against the company and when the news got to workers in the plant, they celebrated William's victory on the shop floor. Beyond the favorable ruling for Williams' unemployment case, the workers put so much pressure on the company that they fired the plant manager. The new manager that was hired not only rehired workers that had been laid off, he also brought back the jobs that had been contracted to Israel. The multiple victories won

by the workers was the power of rank-and-file organizing that was at the heart of BWFJ's philosophy of a new trade unionism.[247]

For BWFJ, the story of Genbearco was representative of the new trade unionism they were trying to build and the type of organizing mentality needed to organize southern workers. In reflections about the protracted campaign, BWFJ's TUC concluded that the struggle at Genbearco had important lessons for the larger trade union movement. These lessons were, that "workers struggle in the non-union plants of the Black Belt South take the form of protracted struggle."[248] If efforts to organize or unionize southern workers are rushed, BWFJ argued, they will fail. Organizing the unorganized in the South takes patience, strategy, and consistency. In the Genbearco struggle, there were numerous occasions where workers were fearful to take action. The response was not to give up or avoid the workers' fear, BWFJ helped the workers overcome their fear by not only empowering them but being consistent and having workers see themselves as part of a larger labor movement. This first required BWFJ to reckon with the constant highs and lows of organizing. When a core of workers is developed in a workplace, a strategy that BWFJ used to keep workers engaged at low points of a protracted struggle was to help develop the workers' conscious and trade union outlook by attending conferences and distributing leaflets at other workplaces. By investing in the leadership of rank-and-file workers, the struggles in the workplace can be taken to higher phases of struggle. This is what BWFJ did with Williams and Mattie who were fired from Genbearco. They attended BWFJ's Workers School and participated in some of the organization's campaigns and subsequently were central to achieving the victories against Genbearco. The last major point that the Genbearco struggle

[247] Ibid., 6.
[248] Ibid., 7-8.

represented was the role of community in BWFJ's approach of a new trade unionism. Since the Kmart struggle in 1981, BWFJ argued that "the development of a community base of support for labor is fundamentally a strategic consideration."[249] It was believed by BWFJ that "the stronger the community base, the better conditions for workers to stand up without fear."[250] In the Genbearco struggle that is what occurred, workers would oftentimes meet in churches, and when needed workers reached out to the churches and gained their support. Building community support for workplace struggles and workplace support for community struggles was one of BWFJ's guiding principles and main task as a workplace-based community organization.

When BWFJ formed the TUC, they made it clear that while its focus was on Black workers, they were concerned about the well-being of all workers. BWFJ developed the policy that non-BWFJ members could join the TUC and because companies in the South use racism to divide workers, the TUC was even open to white workers. One white worker who was a leader in the TUC and long-time BWFJ supporter is Jim Wrenn. Wrenn had been part of the trade union movement since the 1970s after he graduated from Duke University. When BWFJ was founded in 1981, Wrenn was involved in supporting and helping with its organizing efforts. Wrenn was also in attendance at both the 1985 and 1986 Workers School.

[249] Ibid.
[250] Ibid.

Figure 20: Jim Wrenn (middle) in conversation with the Director of the Bloomer Hill Health Center (left) and Naeema Muhammad (right). Photo Source: The Communiversity.

Wrenn's participation in the TUC was important because he was also employed at Firestone and was a supporter of the Affirmative Action struggles of the Black employees. When Wrenn was fired from Firestone for union organizing, he still supported the struggle there and helped workers organize at Genbearco and his new place of employment, Consolidated Diesel Company. Wrenn was committed to the workers movement and following the leadership of Black workers.

Though not included in the *New Trade Unionism*, BWFJ and the TUC had members who were putting action behind its objective of fighting for rank-and-file democracy and control in existing unions. BWFJ had members who were in leadership and active in the APWU, teacher unions, and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Union (AFSCME) Local 1194. Starting in 1982, Ajamu Dillahunt and other postal workers in Raleigh initiated a rank-file caucus of their local union. The national APWU and the local that they were part of made decisions for its members without their input. Dillahunt and his co-workers felt that

members should understand what is going on with their co-workers and be part of the union's decision making. The initiators of the rank-and-file caucus in the local APWU were advocating for the union to be "more militant in terms of its defense of members who had grievances and to have a higher profile of the union in opposition to management."[251] Thirty minutes from Raleigh in Durham, North Carolina, Angaza Laughinghouse while working for the office of Affirmative Action in Durham, played a leading role in helping revitalize AFSCME Local 1194, the city workers union in Durham. In 1986, through supporting the rank-and-file organizing of the majority Black sanitation workers in Durham, Laughinghouse was able to help activate inactive members of Local 1194 and recruit new members to the union. Local 1194 and its rank-and-file leadership fought for better pay and working conditions for city workers, fought for Affirmative Action in promotions and hiring, demanded the city recognize the paid holiday honoring Dr. King, fought against racism and sexism experienced by city employees, opposed apartheid in South Africa, and actively worked to recruit more rank-and-file members.[252] BWFJ having a base of members among postal workers, city workers, and educators would be a crucial part of its future trade union activity.

To build a strong TUC and provide workers with the training to engage in rank-and-file struggles on the shop floor, BWFJ and the TUC hosted another Workers School. The topic for the day-long session was "Shop Steward and Worker Representative Rank and File Training" and took place on July 26, 1986, in Rocky Mount. The training was attended by roughly thirty workers who were part of the fast-food industry, health care, and manufacturing industry. The

[251] Ajamu Dillahunt (the authors grandfather), "The APWU and the Trade Union Commission," December 15, 2022, interviewed by Ajamu Dillahunt, recording in possession of the author, Raleigh, NC.
[252] "Durham City Workers Fight Anti-Unionism," *Justice Speaks*, January 1987, 4.

organization that had the most workers represented at the training was the Tobacco Workers Union Local 259 out of Wilson, North Carolina.

With the Shop Steward Training, BWFJ approached it from the perspective of its vision for a New Trade Unionism. The TUC hoped "to provide the shop floor leader in a unionized workplace, or the rank and file activist in a nonunionized workplace with new tools in attitude, consciousness, and methods of organizing and winning struggles on the shop floor and in the community based on the real conditions workers are facing in the 1980s."[253] The Shop Steward Training was structured in three main workshops: how to address workplace grievances, labor legislation and political education and action, and the relationship between labor and the struggle for Black political power.

Figure 21: Board Member of the Workers School leading a workshop on Labor Law and Legislation at the Shop Steward Training, July 1986. Photo Source: The Communiversity.

[253] "BWFJ Hold Worker Rep Seminar," 3.

For the session on grievances, Rosalyn Pelles from the Duke Grievance Committee (DGC) explained the grievance process and gave examples of the day-to-day responsibilities of a shop steward or worker representative. Pelles also provided workers with examples of the literature they used to successfully win grievances. That is, workers did not just hear about grievances, they saw examples of how it unfolded in real time. An important workshop, Saladin Muhmmad summed up its significance and meaning for the labor movement. Muhammad proclaimed that "it is very, very, important that we have a new understanding of what the labor movement is." He stressed that unionized and non-unionized workers had to understand that "the labor movement includes workers who are organized in non-union shops and workers who are unionized… For too long, the labor movement has been defined solely as a trade union movement. Therefore, no matter what kind of committee you build, whether it's a grievance committee, whether it's a rank and file caucus, if it didn't have a union at that shop, you were somehow not considered as part of the labor movement."[254] The TUC hoped that the training would offer a view of the labor movement that showed "workers are fighting back and workers are finding ways to apply union methods in non-unionized shops." To combat the exclusion of non-union workers from the labor movement, Muhammad encouraged the workers from Eastern North Carolina in attendance at the training to join the Central Labor Unions in the area. He felt that it "was very important for workers in non-unionized shops to have committees to be represented in the CLUs, along with representatives of local unions." If non-unionized worker committees were part of the CLUs, they would be in a position "to shape a labor policy in that area, for all workers." Having workers who were not unionized active in the CLUs, they could

[254] Saladin Muhammad to Attendees of BWFJ's Shop Stewart Training, July 26, 1986.

"fight to push trade unions in the direction of beginning to see that these workers in non-unionized shops who are organized are equal to them."[255]

For the session on labor laws, workers were exposed to labor legislation and the role that workers played in establishing pro-worker laws. At the same time, the session leader examined how the laws that were fought for and won by workers for their benefit, were later used against them for anti-union purposes. To conclude the entire day-long session, the TUC organized a session on the power of workers in the Black political movement. This part of the program exemplified workers power in the context of the Black Belt South, but the workshop also used the workers movement in South Africa as an example of workers being a leading force in the struggle outside of the workplace. Ashaki Binta told participants that BWFJ thinks understanding the character of the workers movement in South Africa and the role it played in the anti-apartheid movement offered "important lessons" for BWFJ. This internationalism that was expressed at its Shop Steward Training would be further developed and institutionalized by BWFJ's Women's Commission (the focus of the next chapter).

Fruit of Labor Singing Ensemble

As BWFJ was building out its annual MLK Support for Labor Banquet, The Workers School, *Justice Speaks*, and the Trade Union Commission, they also incorporated culture in their activities. Founded in 1984 as the cultural arm of BWFJ, the Fruit of Labor Singer Ensemble performed songs at the banquets, the Workers Schools, and announced their practice and performance in *Justice Speaks*. Like SNCC's Freedom Singers, they were not just bringing music to the movement, they were singing songs with a meaning and purpose that reflected the African American struggle for freedom and self-determination.

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[255] Ibid.

Figure 22: The Fruit of Labor Singing Ensemble singing at the Workers School Banquet at the Franklinton Center at Bricks, 1985. Photo Source: The Communiversity.

BWFJ founding member and mentor Abner Berry or Baba Sufu, as they called him, stressed to his younger comrades that the Black freedom movement had to have a cultural component. When the Fruit of Labor (FOL) was formed, it situated itself as providing music that spoke to the conditions, suffering, and aspirations of the Black working class. The newly formed group saw themselves as providing freedom songs in the tradition of Gil Scott Herron's "The Revolution Will be Televised." While identifying with the history of freedom song, the FOL maintained that "Today, Black workers have the opportunity to use our songs, music and culture to promote our dignity, our struggle for freedom, and our struggle against exploitation both as workers and as an oppressed nation."[256] Although they sounded professional when they took the stage, those

[256] "Breaking the Chains," *Justice Speaks,* February 1986, 7.

in the FOL were not full-time singers, they were workers. After work, they would get together, practice, and take their show on the road to various worker, community, and Black liberation events. During the years 1985-86, BWFJ put programs and institutions in place that set BWFJ on the path to become a strong, healthy, and effective organization. It was making strides in the workplace, in worker education, in media, on the cultural front, and fighting women's oppression.

CHAPTER FOUR: "Women Hold Up Half the Sky": The Women's Commission of Black Workers for Justice

Women make the world go round
Sisters working together have found,
That women hold up half the sky,
And together we can fly high.

I'm a woman willing to make a stand,
To fight against oppression on every hand,
Whether it be at home, on the job, or in the street.
For us all to move forward, this, we must defeat.

Women make the world go round
Sisters working together have found,
That women hold up half the sky,
And together we can fly high.[257]

When BWFJ's Organizing Committee met on October 26, 1985, the organization implemented programs that would strengthen its practice of empowering workers and building their leadership. In addition to accepting proposals on forming the Trade Union Commission and publishing J*ustice Speaks* as a monthly newspaper, Ashaki Binta proposed that BWFJ form a Women's Commission (WC). In the majority of BWFJ's workplace activities, Black women not only made up the largest portion of the workforce, but they were also the group that was most willing to engage in an organized effort to fight for better wages and working conditions. As part of its organizing, BWFJ never ignored or overlooked that most of its workplace leadership was Black women. During the Kmart struggle, BWFJ situated the workers struggle as a fight against both racism and sexism. In Martin County, when women workers at the Perdue chicken plant were in need of support, BWFJ organized an event on Mother's Day and framed the women's struggle as being a fight against triple oppression: racism, sexism, and classism. On the

[257] "Black Workers for Justice: Women's Commission History and Purpose," *Justice Speaks*, March 1991, 8. This poem was inspired by women in the Chinese Communist Party.

leadership front, women were well represented on BWFJ's OC and helped shape the organization's political program. Despite BWFJ having a regular opposition to sexism and the exploitation of women, Binta felt that BWFJ needed to do more. Her proposal for a Women's Commission was guided by a perspective that believed the challenges confronting women workers was not "an organic part" of BWFJs organizing program.[258] Binta's proposal maintained that the main priority of the WC would be to institutionalize a gender analysis in all of BWFJ's activities and examine each BWFJ program and policy to ensure it is taking into consideration women's development. The proposal also called for the WC to prioritize developing "a plan to systematically assess the conditions of women in the Black Belt South."[259] BWFJ's WC wanted to project a view that women were not only oppressed because they were women, but also because they were workers.

This chapter explores the formative years (1986-88) of Black Workers for Justice's Women's Commission. In this chapter, I examine how the WC defined its organizing vision and the diagnosis it made about the oppression of southern women workers. Early on, the WC committed themselves to building a "women worker consciousness movement." This theoretical term proposed by the WC sought "to legitimize and create an atmosphere that allows women's issues to surface in the context of the class motion being organized by the BWFJ."[260] This chapter also unearths how the WC made this theory come to life through its organizing campaign at the Rocky Mount Undergarment Plant (RMUP). The RMUP, a textile plant in Rocky Mount, employed majority Black women and subjected them to slave-like conditions. Through its organizing efforts at RMUP, the WC exposed the inhumane treatment workers experienced on

[258] Ashaki M. Binta, "Proposal on BWFJ's Women's Development," October 1985.
[259] Ibid.
[260] "Women's Commission Organizes: A Program for Women Workers," *Justice Speaks*, April 1986, 3.

the shop floor, helped the women workers organize for better pay and working conditions, framed their struggle as a battle against sexism on the job, and recruited a workplace leader into BWFJ.

Beyond workplace organizing and theorizing about women's oppression, the WC and the women in it, were the driving force of BWFJ's internationalism. While BWFJ always situated its work as being in solidarity with movements for social transformation in different parts of the world (from South Africa to Grenada to Nicaragua), the WC and its members moved BWFJ's internationalism from verbal articulations to programmatic implementation and action. For example, in 1985, the future director of the WC, Rukiya Dillahunt, was the lead organizer for an anti-apartheid conference at Riddick Hall on the campus of North Carolina State University in Raleigh. At the conference that Dillahunt helped organize, speeches were given by a South African minister, Rev. Matlalepula Chabaku, a representative from the Pan-African Congress, and a keynote address by Andrew Mesando of the African National Congress (ANC).[261] Following the speeches and various presentations, the conference concluded with a march in downtown Raleigh where there were more speeches and remarks shared by a representative from the Palestinian Liberation Organization. It was the WC that brought a consistent form of internationalism to BWFJ's Organizing Program. This chapter concludes by examining the WC's organizing of women workers "speak-outs," the mini-conference it organized, and its commitment to host events as part of International Women's Day.

[261] "Anti-Apartheid Conference Pushes Struggle Ahead," *Justice Speaks*, November 1985, 6; Ed Marks, "Raleigh Marchers Protest Apartheid," *The News and Observer*, October 20, 1985, 33. In his speech, Mesando declared that the South African freedom fighter "will make no apologies to anybody. We will use all the means at our disposal…Let this revolution not stop in the townships. Let it go into the white areas. The white democrats must make sure that they mobilize the white resistance in white areas… If it is true that apartheid is a crime against humanity, let us see that the crime is punished."

From Theory to Practice: Building the Women's Commission and the Struggle at Rocky Mount Undergarment

We're in slavery inside that plant.[262]

Ida Boddie, Rocky Mount Undergarment Worker

On March 9, 1986, one day after International Women's Day, the Women's Commission held its first meeting in Rocky Mount. Gathered in the living room of Naeema and Saladin Muhammad's home, Ashaki Binta, Rukiya Dillahunt, Naeema Muhammad, and Shafeah M'Balia began to craft the WC's mission and purpose. This initial core of the WC acknowledged how important it was that "a number of women sit on the Organizing Committee and hold positions of responsibility [in the BWFJ]." At the same time, the four women concluded that the existing role of women in BWFJ was "not enough when looking at the widespread oppression of women in our society."[263] In a reflection about the first meeting, Binta, Dillahunt, Muhammad, and M'Balia recalled that they talked "to each other about our experiences, our history, our hardships and struggles, our problems, our thinking, our views, and our visions for the future. We 'spoke out' emotionally, politically, and theoretically."[264] As a result of their honest, personal, political, and working class orientation conversation, the four women decided that the WC would have three main focus points: 1) define and give life to the concept of a women workers consciousness movement, 2) fight for women workers leadership in BWFJ, the workplace, and community, and 3) study the oppression of women and organize against it.[265] Structure wise, given the wide-reaching intentions of the WC, they decided to keep membership

[262] Marion Blackburn, "Workers picket at RM plant to protest employee layoffs," *The Nashville Graphic*, June 5, 1991, 6.
[263] "Women's Commission Organizes: A Program for Women Workers," 3
[264] "Women Workers 'Speak Out,'" *Justice Speaks*, March 1987, 4.
[265] "Women's Commission Organizes: A Program for Women Workers," 3

open to women who might not be members of BWFJ but were part of the movement for social progress.

Following its inaugural meeting, the WC started to put action behind some of its focus points. At a mass meeting called in Rocky Mount to fight an unjust school merger, the community decided to form an organization to oppose it. The proposed leadership for this new organization had appointed men as its chairperson and vice-chairperson. In the spirit of its newly formed commission dedicated to fighting women's oppression, BWFJ critiqued the male-dominated leadership structure and urged a woman-leader be appointed as a chairperson instead of being subjected to behind-the-scenes work.[266] In alignment with its goal to "develop, promote, [and] legitimize" a women's workers consciousness movement, the WC initiated a special issue of *Justice Speaks* on women's history and political contributions. The special issue included an article titled, "'Women Worker Consciousness': Key to Victory." In the article, the WC gave more context and clarity on its vision for a women worker consciousness movement. The WC maintained that the oppression of Black women workers in the U.S. South was tantamount to the oppression of Black women workers in South Africa. Given their similarities in oppression, the WC thought that a women workers consciousness movement in the U.S. could learn from the success of the women's movement in South Africa. The article on what a women's worker consciousness could be, argued that "The South African freedom struggle in its developing trade union working class movement may provide key insights into the direction women's movements must take to resolve centuries of male dominance and oppression."[267]

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[266] "Rocky Mount Movement Opposes 'Separate but Unequal' Policies," Justice Speaks, June 1986, 1 and 7.
[267] "'Women Worker Consciousness': Key to Victory," *Justice Speaks*, March 1986, 4; "South African Women Emerging into 'Women Worker Consciousness," *Justice Speaks* March 1986, 8.

The WC emerged in a time of widespread theorizing about Black women's oppression and the continued development of Black feminist thought. Decades leading up to the founding of the WC, Black women thinkers and activists formed "the Third World Women's Alliance, the National Black Feminist Organization, the Combahee River Collective, the National Alliance of Black Feminist, and the Black Women Organized for Action."[268] But the Women's Commission did not see themselves as part of the Black feminist struggles that emerged in the 1970s and 80s. While the WC shared a similar understanding about the characteristics of Black women's oppression that Black feminist articulated, they felt that the overall analysis of Black feminist lacked an embeddedness in the working class. That is, the WC did not identify with Black feminist because they felt that the Black feminist movement of the time-period was more middle class and "lacking in a working class and black freedom perspective which could fundamentally impact upon the traditional patriarchal social relations in the Black community."[269] As can be understood by their work in the pages that follow, the WC strongly believed "it is the Black working class who must take up the struggle against male supremacy, sexism, and patriarchy in the Black community and set the entire community upon a course that will challenge the national oppression, racism, and patriarchy of U.S. monopoly capitalism."[270] The WC contributed to the conversation on Black women's oppression, a viewpoint that was rooted in the workplace and concentrated on organizing at the point of production—where majority of Black women were

[268] Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 4. For more on these organizations and their political perspective see Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017); Patricia Romney, *We Were There: The Third World Women's Alliance and the Second Wave* (New York: Feminist Press, 2021); Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, *Sisters in the Struggle: African in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).
[269] *Women Workers Are Leaders, Too!* (Rocky Mount, NC: Black Workers for Justice, undated), 7.
[270] Ibid.

concentrated. Despite not identifying with the term, the WC never excluded themselves from working with women and organizations who identified as Black feminist focused.

As they sought to develop their political program, the WC was clear on the tradition of fighting women's oppression that they were part of. The special issue for *Justice Speaks* also included profiles that honored and celebrated Black women activists and thinkers like Zora Neal Hurston and Ella Baker who both challenged capitalism, racism, sexism, and imperialism. Women in the WC had a history of their own organizing against sexism and being mentored by Black women activists. While in the African Peoples Party in the 1970s, Binta, Muhammad, and M'Balia were mentored by long-time freedom fighter Queen Mother Audley Moore. Queen Mother, as the younger women activist would call her, was born in 1898. As a domestic worker in New Orleans, Queen Mother became a follower of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association. She would eventually move to New York and continue her work as a domestic worker. By the early 1930s, she joined the Harlem Branch of the Communist Party U.S.A. and organized a union on her job.[271] Moore's organizing skills and ability to mobilize women workers were so sharp and widely respected in the Communist Party that the Harlem Branch elected her chair of the chapter's Women's Commission.[272]

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[271] Erik McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 78. Queen Mother was attracted to the Party's internationalism, position on the "Negro Question," and their response to the Scottsboro Case. The Scottsboro Case mobilized a number of forces in the Black freedom movement to join the CPUSA. The Scottsboro boys were, nine young Black men in 1931 who were falsely accused of rape by an all-white jury. Although innocent, combined, the nine youths served 100 years in prison. For more on Moore see, Erik S. McDuffie and Komozi Woodard, "'If you're in a country that's progressive, the woman is progressive": Black Women Radicals and The Making of the Politics and Legacy of Malcolm X," *Biography* 36, no. 13 (2013): 508; Keisha Blain, "'To Keep Alive the Teachings of Garvey and the Work of the UNIA': Audley Moore, Black Women's Activism, and Nationalist Politics during the Twentieth Century" *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* (2018): 83; Erik S. McDuffie "'I wanted a Communist philosophy, but I wanted us to have a chance to organize our people': the diasporic radicalism of Queen Mother Audley Moore and the origins of black power" *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 3, No. 2, (2010), 181-195.
[272] Ibid., 86.

By the 1970s, Moore had mentored Malcolm X, the young people in the Revolutionary Action Movement, became a leading voice in the struggle for Reparations, and served on the central committee of the African Peoples Party. In an essay reflecting on her relationship with Queen Mother Moore, former APP member M'Balia wrote, "as a young woman activist coming of age during the late 1960s and early 1970s, she [Queen Mother Moore] turned out to be the foundation of my ideological development."[273] Binta and Muhammad also identified Moore as being a source of inspiration in their political development. Her overall analysis on reparations, internationalism, self-determination, and the working class, resonated with them. Moore would regularly meet with women in the APP encouraging them to develop their leadership and stand up for themselves.[274] Muhammad recalled, "Queen Mother was a woman warrior, she had been out there for a long time, years before we were ever thought of, Queen Mother was doing the work and engaging women and teaching women on their right and ability to be engaged in the struggle and to speak up and speak out and to not be afraid."[275]

The women in the APP were doing more than honoring and learning from women activists they admired, they were also fighting existing forms of sexism within the Party. In 1977 in preparation for the APP's Third-Party Congress, a shift was happening inside the Party around the women's question. Early on, many in the APP believed that it was the role of the women to cook, take care of the kids, and still actively participate in meetings. Having so many tasks, however, prevented women from being able to fully participate. Muhammad remembered women were beginning to question that practice and asked the men "how are you expecting me

[273] Shafeah M'Balia, "Remembering Queen Mother Moore," *Black Perspectives*, March 1, 2019, accessed December 20, 2022, https://www.aaihs.org/remembering-queen-mother-moore/.
[274] Ibid.
[275] Naeema Muhammad, "Women and the APP," November 11, 2019, interviewed by Ajamu Dillahunt, recording in possession of the author, Raleigh, NC.

to be developed when I'm not given the opportunity to develop?" She continued, "every time there is a meeting or activity, I have to be the one to stay behind and tend to the children."[276] Some of the men claimed that women did not want to be involved and were not putting forth any effort to be engaged. Muhammad responded to those critiques with "how the hell do you do that when you don't put forward no effort to see to it that the children are taken care of? And why can't you stay home with them while I go to the meeting."[277] Recognizing how serious the question of women's oppression was, in preparation to have a discussion about it at the Third-Party Congress, Muhammad traveled all across the country to ensure Party members were prepared for the discussion. At the gathering, APP member Akineyle Umoja remembered, "sister-comrades demanded 'full participation.' These sisters called for elimination of barriers that blocked women from playing any role in the organization or the movement."[278]

Grounded in their experiences from the APP, the women in BWFJ's WC were not just interested in the theory and history of fighting women's oppression. They were equally committed to action. To accompany its conversation on women's oppression in the South, the WC began its inaugural meeting by distributing copies of *Justice Speaks* at the Rocky Mount Undergarment Plant. One month before its inaugural meeting, a woman worker from RMUP attended a BWFJ event about workers in North Carolina. By the end of the meeting, the worker provided a detailed overview about the brutal conditions in the plant and joined BWFJ to fight against problems on the job. When leaders of the WC got up at 6:30am on the day of their inaugural meeting to distribute copies of *Justice Speaks* at the RMUP, they passed out an article

[276] Ibid.
[277] Ibid.
[278] Akinyele Umoja, "Queen Mother Moore: Matriarch of the Captive African Nation," *Black Perspectives*, February 27, 2019, accessed January 1, 2023, https://www.aaihs.org/queen-mother-moore-matriarch-of-the-captive-african-nation/

titled, “Workers Don’t Matter at Rocky Mount Undergarment, A Sweatshop for Women Workers.”[279] The article critiqued Rocky Mount Undergarment’s sick policy and exposed the inhumane working conditions in the plant. At the end of the article targeting undergarment workers, the WC urged workers to get organized to take on management. Despite intimidation tactics from the RMUP, the WC’s presence was well-received. BWFJ sold over one-hundred copies of *Justice Speaks* outside of the plant and was told that the newspaper was generating conversation. The workers seeing their problems and issues discussed in paper increased their belief that change can and should take place. M’Balia recalled that eventually the women at the RMUP would “come ready for [BWFJ].”

BWFJ’s article that called the plant a sweatshop was not an exaggeration. The workload and working conditions were beyond exploitative at Rocky Mount Undergarment. Employees could not make emergency phone calls and were expected to “produce 120 pairs of underwear every thirty minutes.”[280] Workers made an average salary of $3.35 per hour and had not received a raise in over two decades.[281] At the time, the federal law did not allow employees to work over forty hours a week. At the Undergarment plant however, the boss threatened “to fire workers if they don't work more than forty-hours— without overtime pay.”[282] If a worker got sick and missed work, they were required to submit a doctor's note. Management often went to the extreme of calling the doctor to ensure an employee was actually seen. Because the RMUP did not provide quality health insurance or pay their workers a living wage, it made visiting the doctor impossible. In one case, Auberi, a worker at Undergarment caught the flu and missed

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[279] “Workers Don’t Matter at Rocky Mount Undergarment, A Sweatshop for Women Workers,” *Justice Speaks*, March 1986, 1.
[280] “Women Workers at Rocky Mount Undergarment Company,” in *New Trade Unionism: A Bold Vision for Labor* (Rocky Mount, NC: Black Workers for Justice, 1986), 9.
[281] Ibid; “Workers Don’t Matter at Rocky Mount Undergarment, A Sweatshop for Women Workers,” 1.
[282] “Workers Don’t Matter at Rocky Mount Undergarment, A Sweatshop for Women Workers,” 7.

work but could not afford to go to the doctor. She turned in a doctor's note and management called and was told by the doctor that she had not been seen. The manager fired her without question. Auberi was not an anomaly, women were regularly fired for the same reason at Rocky Mount Undergarment. Also at RMUP, there were no windows or stable air conditioning. Women workers reported that they regularly experienced sexual harassment on the job. Injuries were also common among workers because the sewing machines did not have the proper protective equipment. Although the company was required to have a nurse on site 24/7, at the RMUP no nurses were provided to treat the numerous work-related injuries. The conditions were so bad that one worker told BWFJ, "the only way you or your family can benefit by being a worker at Rocky Mount Undergarment is to drop dead! But, make sure it's on the job!"[283]

Working conditions at the RMUP were not always bad. When the plant first opened in 1955, they refused to hire Black people until 1965 (one year after the Civil Rights Act was passed). According to one worker, when the company was majority white, the overall working conditions were pretty good; workers had health care, vacation, sick pay, and pension plans.[284] As time went on, the population of Black women workers began to increase, and Undergarment started decreasing health care benefits and paid leave. Essentially, "the more Black people they hired, the worse the conditions got."[285] By the time the 1980's came around, Black workers were 90% of the workers population at the Rocky Mount Undergarment plant. Conditions got so unbearable and inhumane that when BWFJ began to leaflet at the plant, workers saw the need to take action.

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[283] "Undergarment Worker Speaks to Co-Workers" *Justice Speaks*, November 1989, 5.
[284] "The Story Behind Rocky Mount Undergarment: From Members of The Undergarment Workers Union," September 1992, Theresa El-Amin Papers, Box 2, Folder 8, Rubenstein Library.
[285] Ibid.

The WC took seriously the willingness of women workers at Rocky Mount Undergarment to fight for better pay and working conditions. At its second meeting in April of 1986, the WC decided to adopt the struggle at the RUMP as its main campaign. Now that the efforts at RMUP was an official campaign, BWFJ returned to the gate to pass out leaflets. This time, they distributed leaflets informing workers of their rights to organize for better pay and working conditions. As expected, management did not welcome BWFJ leaders trying to help workers fight for fairness on the job. On one occasion, when the WC were distributing leaflets at the RUMP's gate, management tried to intimidate them. Dillahunt recalls the plant manager yelling to them "you can't be on this property." The WC, clear on their rights and committed to worker empowerment, told the manager that "we're on the sidewalk. This doesn't belong to you, this belongs to Rocky Mount."[286] Intimidation tactics were not going to deter the WC. They established a regular presence at the plant selling *Justice Speaks* and recruiting workers to join its in-plant committee. This struggle that the WC was entering into would not be a short-term battle. The fight at the RUMP would last until the mid-90s and the workers formed the Undergarment Workers for Justice and sought out affiliation with the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union.

[286] Rukiya Dillahunt, interviewed by Nandini Srinivasan, Duke Human Rights Center, February 2014.

Building BWFJ's Internationalism and Directly Confronting U.S. Imperialism

I have devoted my life to fighting against exploitation and oppression, whether its here in the U.S. or other places in the world…Standing with the people of Nicaragua is no different than opposing apartheid in South Africa or police brutality in Raleigh or racist violence in Kittrell.[287]

Rukiya Dillahunt, 1986

Fighting against U.S. imperialism was the norm for activists in the 1980s. In addition to mobilizing for an end to apartheid in South Africa, activists in the United States also mobilized and built a movement opposing the United States support for the undemocratic, right-wing, and US-backed Contras in Nicaragua. The contras were known for committing documented crimes of murder, rape, abduction, and pillage. Founded in 1981, the Contras were created, trained, and funded by the United States to oppose the newly formed and people-centered Sandinista government. When the Sandinista Revolution succeeded in 1979, it was not only a victory against the dictator Anastasio Somoza, but it was also a victory against the United States. Before 1979, Nicaragua "was an impoverished, underdeveloped, sparsely populated country in the middle of Central America."[288] According to historian Matilde Zimmermann, "political life of Nicaragua from independence to 1979 was characterized by the exclusion of workers and peasants from political power."[289] The U.S. had been known for intervening in the country's politics for its own interest. During the U.S. occupation of Nicaragua from 1912-1933, "Nicaragua's banks, customs office, and railroads were signed over to American bankers."[290] When the Sandinistas began to govern, they were committed to building a different and

[287] "Activists Take Protest Of Nicaraguan Policies to War-Torn Districts," *The Carolinian*, July 24, 1986, 1-2.
[288] Matilde Zimmermann, *Sandinista: Carlos Fonseca and the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 4. For more on the Sandinistas, the Nicaraguan Revolution, and its origins see, Robert J. Sierakowski, *Sandinistas: A Moral History* (Norte Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019); Carlos Fonseca, Daniel Ortega, Tomás Borge, Humberto Ortega, Jaime Wheelock, and Bruce Marcus, *Sandinistas Speak: Speeches, Writings, and Interviews with Leaders of Nicaragua's Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder, 1982).
[289] Ibid., 4-5.
[290] Ibid., 5.

uncorrupt society that prioritized the needs of its people. Despite the consistent violence from the Contras backed by millions of U.S. dollars, the Sandinistas were able to make major societal advancements. Within five years of being in power, the Sandinistas dropped illiteracy in the country from 58% to 12%. On the land and crop production front, the Sandinistas granted land to over 40,000 landless people and witnessed a large increase in rice and bean production. The new government built hundreds of hospitals, significantly decreased the country's infant mortality rate, built hundreds of rehydration centers, and increased student enrollment in schools.

Like it did with apartheid in South Africa, BWFJ felt that the Black working class was connected to and had a responsibility to oppose United States imperialism. The organization dispatched two of its members, Milton Williams and Rukiya Dillahunt, on a ten-day delegation to Nicaragua with Witness for Peace on its Black and Third World Delegation. The delegation was organized to "demonstrate to the Nicaraguan people that many U.S. citizens do not support the death and destruction perpetuated by the U.S. support Contras."[291] Moreover, Witness for Peace wanted to show U.S. citizens first-hand what its tax dollars were funding. For this trip, Dillahunt was not just a participant on the delegation, she was the coordinator.[292] In preparation for their departure she sent out a letter asking for diaper donations for a Women's Birthing Clinic located in the region of Nicaragua where the majority of the people of African descent lived. In addition to the donations, Dillahunt helped assign roles for the delegates. To ensure a well-

[291] Rukiya Dillahunt, "Diapers for Nicaragua," July 25, 1986.

[292] International travel was not new for Dillahunt. In 1973, as committed Pan-Africanists, Dillahunt and her husband traveled to the socialist-governed Tanzania. While in Tanzania, the Dillahunts met with Black Americans in exile, went to a number of bookstores, and purchased literature on socialism in Africa. Enjoying their trip so much, the Dillahunts overstayed their visas. As they nervously got their expired visas checked at the airport, the border guard opened their luggage and saw the Marxist literature and he smiled. Despite the expired visa, the guard gave them the approval to board their flight. The Dillahunts summed up that experience as "Marx saved us."

structured and organized trip, Dillahunt assigned a religious and spiritual leader for the trip, a health coordinator, and music coordinators.[293]

Figure 23: From Left to Right: Melvin Williams, John Calhoun, and Rukiya Dillahunt in Nicaragua during their Delegation. August 1986. Photo Source: The Communiversity.

During the time of the Black and Third World Delegation, Nicaragua was in the middle of a war. That is, the safety of the delegates was not promised. Delegates stayed in warzones under the protection of the Sandinistas. The delegates were not only being educated about the problems, but they were also participating in work projects and protesting U.S. support for the Contras at the US embassy.[294] On the trip, Dillahunt and Williams along with other delegates were digging

[293] At the time of Dillahunt's delegation, her daughter Dara Dillahunt, was also in Nicaragua as part of a month-long Spanish intensive language program. As a senior at Enloe High School, Dara not only wanted to improve her Spanish, she also wanted to meet Nicaraguan youth and learn about their culture. Like her mother, Dara planned to return to North Carolina and educate her peers about Nicaragua and urge them to oppose U.S. support for the Contras.

[294] For more on Witness for Peace and its mission, see Ed Griffin-Nolan, *Witness for Peace: A Story of Resistance* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991).

ditches to help communities protect themselves from contra attacks. While there, the delegation had a packed schedule and met with the Sandinista Workers Union, the Nicaraguan Workers Central, various community leaders, educators and teacher unions, faith and co-op leaders, representatives from the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), and Afro-Nicaraguans in the Bluefields. Dillahunt stayed with an 86-year-old elder and her granddaughter who was a schoolteacher. Conditions wise, she remembered there being a lack of electricity and running water in Orinoco. As for the spirit and consciousness of the people of Nicaragua, they welcomed the delegation with open arms and made clear that they separated the people of the U.S. from the actions of their government. The delegates were able to see up close and personal the lies told by the U.S. government. It had been told to the American people that there was no religious freedom in Nicaragua and the churches experienced an overwhelming amount of repression. When the Black and Third World Delegation arrived, they interacted with a wide range of churches and religious groups who had never experienced any form of repression from the Sandinista government. On the delegation, a minister from the United States had the opportunity to stay with a Nicaraguan minister and his family. The minister from the U.S. recalled them sharing a special bond. Through the bond they shared, he learned that in Nicaragua "the ministers are part of the movement.. Who are rolling up their sleeves and helping the people." Delegates also heard from families who had children kidnapped by the Contras. Dillahunt also recalls seeing pictures of Nelson Mandela and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr at some of the places they visited. Communities in Nicaragua openly expressed their opposition to apartheid in South Africa.

Figure 24: Rukiya Dillahunt in Nicaragua digging a ditch to help build community protection from the Contras in August 1986.

At their various meetings and interactions with Nicaraguan leaders and organizations, Dillahunt and Williams passed out copies of BWFJ's letter to the Nicaraguan people. The statement expressed BWFJ's unequivocal support for Nicaraguan and their revolution. BWFJ declared that "Our perspective is an internationalist one" and "we see the need to support the working people of all countries because we have a common enemy in the form of exploitation and the system of profit."[295] At the same time, BWFJ felt that its support for the Nicaraguan people went deeper than a general internationalist viewpoint. The organization maintained that their "relationship to the Nicaraguan people goes beyond our internationalist duties. We have both suffered at the hands of wealthy U.S. businessmen and the various governments they put in

[295] "An Open Letter to the Nicaraguan Workers and Peasants," Justice Speak, August 1986.

place in Washington, D. C."[296] In its letter, BWFJ wanted to express that its support for the Nicaraguan people ran deep among its membership. BWFJ proudly shared with the Nicaraguan people that its oldest member, Abner Berry met with workers in his home state of Texas "who were opposing the U.S. invasion of Nicaragua [in 1931]."[297] The open letter concluded with BWFJ admiring the 1979 Revolution and its high level of organization and embracing the Sandinista slogan "Liberty or Death." BWFJ also declared its long-term commitment to fight within the U.S. to end the country's involvement in Nicaragua by engaging in direct action, education, pickets, protest, and strikes.

Once the delegates returned, they were asked to speak at different events and provide written report backs. Freedom Books hosted a report back in Raleigh and *Justice Speaks* published a four-part series on the historic delegation. The first two articles published about the trip, highlighted the delegation meeting and staying with Afro-Nicaraguans. As members of a Black workers organization, Dillahunt and Williams were eager to learn about, build relationships with, and report back on their interactions with the African descendant population in Nicaragua. Dillahunt and Williams shared that the Atlantic Coast region of Nicaragua was where not only people of African descent lived, it was home to six different indigenous communities with their own language and culture. They learned that the Atlantic Coast region was different from other parts of Nicaragua because it was colonized by the British not by Spain.[298]

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[296] Ibid.
[297] Ibid.
[298] "Black Delegation Visits Afro-Nicaraguan Bluefields on the Atlantic Coast: Part 1," *Justice Speaks*, October 1986, 8.

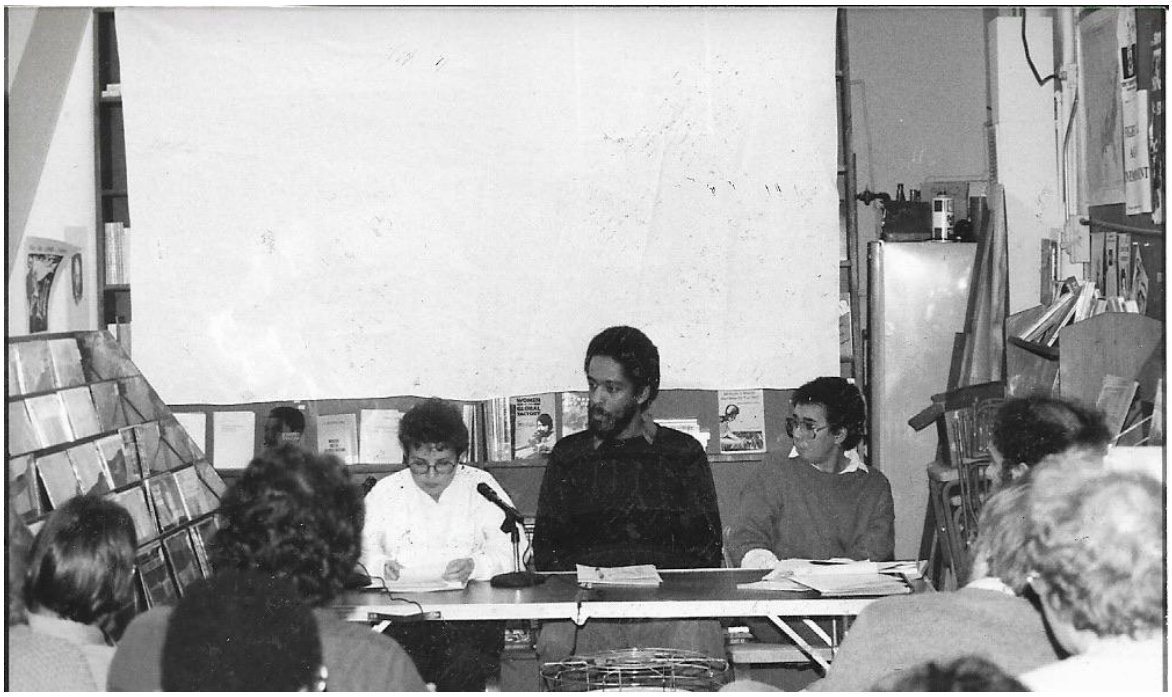

Figure 25: From Left to Right: Aurora Velasquez (A Nicaraguan Health Worker), John Calhoun (Member of the Delegation), and Rukiya Dillahunt at Freedom Books giving a report back on their Delegation in August 1986. Photo Source: The Communiversity

The third article published in the *Justice Speaks* series on Nicaragua unearthed how the country's government, in close relationship with the communities of the Atlantic Coast, were working to correct a history of political exclusion. According to Dillahunt and Williams, a priority of the Sandinista government was to unify the people of Nicaragua. In order to achieve this unification, the government had been discussing an autonomy proposal that caught the attention of the BWFJ delegates. This proposal declared that "the people on the Atlantic coast have the right to preserve their own culture, languages and historical heritage: the right to organize their social and economic activity." The autonomy plan called for national resources to be invested into the Atlantic Coast region. Decisions about how the resources would be used in the Atlantic Coast region would not come from the Nicaraguan government. Instead, local governing structures established by the various communities in the Atlantic Coast region would determine the best usage of the resources. This effort by the Sandinista government was not only

democratic but it allowed a historically oppressed group to be self-determining. Delegates on the Black and Third World Delegation did not just hear about the autonomy program, they saw it in practice. They witnessed and heard first-hand the overwhelming support local people had for the autonomy initiative and the vision put forward by the Sandinista government. Support for the Contras was limited.

Dillahunt and Williams made an important observation. The U.S. invasion and the millions of dollars the country funded to the Contras undermined the effectiveness and potential of the autonomy program. For the BWFJ delegates, African Americans in the United States could "learn valuable lessons" from the autonomy plan. The autonomy plan had the potential to make history for African descendant people in the Americas. It would be the first time indigenous and African descendant people in the Americas could determine their own destiny. This Diasporic potential of the autonomy plan strengthened BWFJ's commitment to opposing and fighting against U.S. involvement in Nicaragua.[299]

The fourth and final article in the *Justice Speaks* series was dedicated to illuminating the important role of women in Nicaragua's revolutionary process. In the article titled, "Women in Nicaragua: Their Struggle Against Oppression," BWFJ argued that "women have been actively involved in the national liberation struggle of Nicaragua."[300] The article maintained that women fought against U.S. marines during the occupation of the 1930s and fought in the military that successfully defeated the dictatorship of Somoza. Women were an organized force. After the 1979 Revolution, women part of the revolution formed the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women (AMNLAE) to fight sexism and ensure women had equal participation in

[299] "Black Delegation Visits Afro-Nicaraguan Bluefields on the Atlantic Coast: Part 3," *Justice Speaks*, December 1986, 8.
[300] "Women in Nicaragua their Struggle Against Oppression," *Justice Speaks*, March 1987, 8.

the revolutionary society. BWFJ learned that "The vital role played by women in the war of liberation caused a healthy reevaluation of sex stereotypes."[301] On the delegation they saw that women in Nicaragua played a role in government, in the Sandinista army, militia, police, and trade unions. Delegates were able to witness how women in the AMNLAE were continuing to fight for more access to education, health care and abortion rights, legislation that protected women and children from physical abuse, and better pay and working conditions. In the eyes of BWFJ and Dillahunt who went to Nicaragua, the story of women in Nicaragua "demonstrate both the international scoop of women's oppression and the profound possibilities of organizing for liberation."[302]

Speak Outs, Mini-Conference, and International Working Women's Day: Building a Strong Women's Movement in the Black Belt South

From South Africa, to Palestine, to the Black Belt South, all over the world men and women have organized national movements of liberation to better their living conditions and to control their future. Women have carried out outstanding responsibilities in these movements but in many cases, it has taken determined and sometimes monumental struggle by women to share in the same human rights as men and to be recognized as being workers, vital to society, or freedom fighters, or any other role other than mother and wife.

Black Workers for Justice, 1988

International Women's Day (March 8th) became a day that the WC used to organize events and bring women workers together to envision a new world. When describing the day's significance, Binta stressed that "International Working Women's Day is more than a pleasurable time of communion and recognition for women all over the world." In her view, what the WC referred to as International Working Women's Day (IWWD), offered "an opportunity for all of us who are engaged in the ongoing worldwide struggle to end national

[301] Ibid.
[302] "Women Workers 'Speak Out'," *Justice Speaks*, March 1987, 4.

oppression and all forms of exploitation---and to bring about a new world order in all spheres of life." That is, Binta believed that the day required a celebration of noble women, but it also required a commitment to action and fighting the systems that keep women oppressed around the world. The WC was committed to fulfilling its action-based and organizing duty for the historic day. The WC's founding meeting was on IWWD in 1986. At its founding the WC committed to action for IWWD by starting its organizing campaign at the Rocky Mount Undergarment Plant.

For IWWD in 1987, the WC's commitment to action continued. They decided to host its first public "Women Worker Speak Out." Through the "speak-out" the WC hoped to teach, learn, and create an environment where conversations could be had about the conditions of women workers in North Carolina. It was their intention that the "speak-out" would create "a shared consciousness, a shared vision about how to bring about change."[303] The idea for a "speak-out" was rooted in an internationalist perspective. When Binta proposed the development of the WC at the 1985 BWFJ meeting, she had been reading about the Chinese Revolution and Mao Zedong's position on women. She was inspired by the Speak Bitterness sessions organized by Chinese women. The Speak Bitterness sessions was the basis of her proposing that the WC host "Women Workers Speak Outs."

[303] Ibid.

Figure 26: The Women's Commission's First "Speak out" in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. BWFJ member Jim Grant attended the meeting as a supporter but mainly for security. Photo Source: The Communiversity.

When the WC gathered women for its "speak out," the WC was under the impression that the "speak out" would be strictly political and focused primarily on workplace struggles. But that was far from the case and the WC's ability to listen was put to test. Women in attendance talked about being mistreated on the job for speaking up against exploitation and not receiving support from some unions. But the main highlight of the discussion was women and the seriousness of domestic abuse.[304] Participants argued that men did not want women to think for themselves and there needed to be shelters for women. The women in the WC were not surprised domestic violence occurred, they knew it was a widespread issue. For it to be brought up in the meeting showed the importance of the issue and the level of trust the "speak outs" engendered. Because this was such a pressing issue, domestic abuse began to be a central part of the WC's organizing program.

[304] "'Speak Out" Shows Abuse of Women a Major Concern," *Justice Speaks*, April 1987, 5.

The Speak Outs were also educational and showed what "women workers leadership" looked like. In preparation for the program, the Women's Commission would set-up audio equipment and video cameras, while the men of BWFJ were responsible for child-care. Men would also do the cooking and all tasks typically assigned to women.[305]

Figure 27: BWFJ men doing childcare at one of the Women's Commission's Events. Photo from *Justice Speaks.*

This shocked some of the women workers who had never seen men volunteer to cook or take care of the kids while they went to a meeting. The approach by the WC showed them an alternative to the societal norms as it relates to gender roles. Summing up the WC's work, Rukiya Dillahunt, wrote "women only groups are important in building mass organizations and

[305] Rukiya Dillahunt, "Women Make the World Go 'Round," *Forward Motion*, 1995, 19.

developing women as leaders."[306] The women-only "speak outs" were "a very good strategy for encouraging women to openly discuss problems" and helped "women gain confidence, self-esteem, and knowledge on issues directly affecting them in the workplace, in the home, and in the community."[307] The WC also hosted workshops for women workers on public speaking, health care, putting out a newsletter, writing a leaflet, videotaping, fighting sexual harassment and so much more.

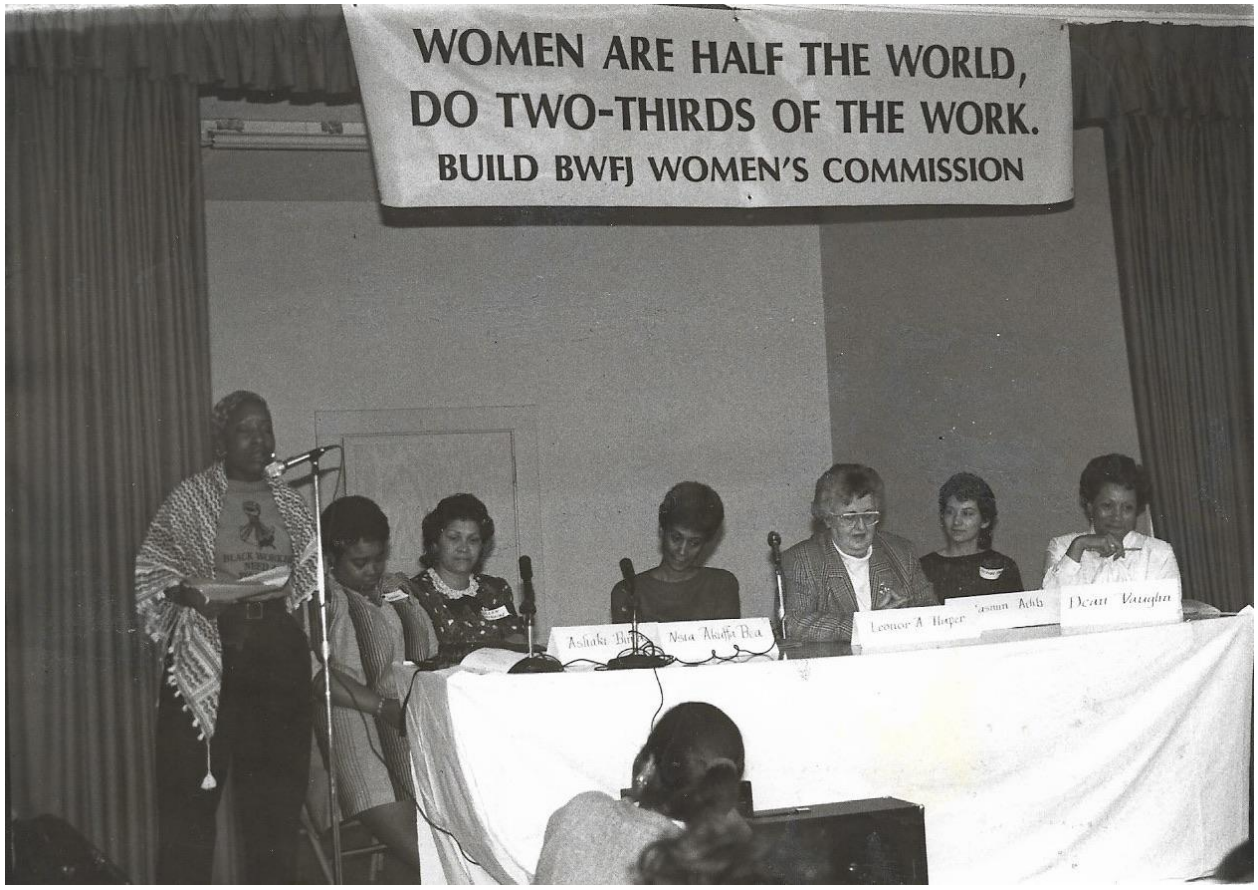

Figure 28: BWFJ leader and soon-to-be Justice Speaks editor Shafeah M'Balia introduced the international panel at the Women's Commission's Mini-Conference.

As committed internationalists, the WC regularly organized events that put African American women in conversation with other women fighting sexism, racism, and imperialism. In

[306] Ibid., 18.
[307] Ibid., 19.

1988, the WC organized a mini conference in Durham, North Carolina. The mini conference was attended by over 50 women and brought together women workers from various workplaces. The speakers at the mini conference were Palestinian, Native American, Filipino, and Nicaraguan women.[308] In addition to a list of incredible international speakers, there were also workshops that were informed by the organizing and previous women worker "speak-outs." Sessions were on: "Women in the Workforce: Juggling Job, Home, Family, and Community," "Unemployment," "Conditions on the Job," "Health and Medical Care," and "Abuse in the Home."[309] Through this conference and its various organizing activities, the WC was increasing its understanding of women's oppression in the South and positioning itself to increase the organizing capacity of women workers.

[308] "Newsteps Forward: Toward Evaluating IWWD '88 and Moving Forward," document in possession of author.
[309] "International Working Women's Day Conference a Success," *Justice Speaks*, April 1988, 2.

CHAPTER FIVE: Schlage Lock and the Fight for Economic and Environmental Justice

We cannot stand by and simply say: that it is the company's own business why it decides to leave a community and lay off hundreds of workers. These hundred of workers have families…Many members of my congregation are workers at Schlage Lock. I have an obligation to recognize their concerns. But I have an obligation as an elected official and as a citizen in this area to recognize how this issue affects all of the workers at Schlage, past and present… More elected officials, ministers and community leaders should be speaking out in support of the workers at Schlage Lock.[310]

Rev. Thomas L. Walker, 1988

I worked at Schlage Lock company for almost twelve years. I was in my twelfth year when I was laid off on the thirtieth of March. My husband is retired and we can not afford to carry the health insurance. My monthly medical bill is over $200.00 and the doctor say that I must have the medicine that he prescribed for me. Most of the time I can only get part of my prescription because I don't have the money to pay for it… I also have a breathing problem, and nerve problems also, like the other workers got.[311]

Helen Williams, Schlage Lock Worker, 1988

On March 19, 1988, Rev. Thomas L. Walker, a local civil rights leader, County Commissioner, and Pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Rocky Mount, was approached by two Black women workers employed by the Schlage Lock Manufacturing Company. Schlage Lock had been in the area for over a decade and had just announced to its workers that it would be closing its Rocky Mount location and moving its operations to Mexico. Although the company was aware that closing the plant would leave over seven hundred people unemployed, Schlage Lock did not offer the hourly workers severance pay or extend their health coverage. Instead, Schlage Lock only offered the soon to be unemployed workers "mental health counseling to help them cope with their eventual job loss."[312] Aware of Rev. Walker's history of supporting workers, the two Schlage Lock employees immediately sought out his support. As the concerned

[310] The Rev. Thomas L. Walker, "In support of Schlage employees," *The Rocky Mount Telegram*, April 29, 1988, 4.
[311] Helen Williams to Citizens Hearing on Schlage Lock Plant Closing, 20 June 1988, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library.
[312] "Schlage Lock: Get Rich and Run!" *Justice Speaks*, November 1987, 2.

workers sat in his office and expressed their frustration with the company's actions, Rev. Walker picked up his phone to call one of the city's most respected labor activist, Saladin Muhammad. Muhammad was the then chairperson of BWFJ and had just opened its Abner Berry Freedom Library and Workers Center in Rocky Mount. Through its Worker Center, BWFJ sought to build an institution that would "serve as a meeting place, educational forum/library, a resource center to create and reproduce informational flyers, and a general center for workers' activities to build struggles in our workplaces and communities."[313] At the Worker Center's opening ceremony on July 22, 1987, Rev. Walker told a reporter with *The Nashville Graphic* that the opening of the center was "a historic moment" and that he "hope[d] this community would make full use of it."[314] When the Schlage Lock workers came to his office a year later, Rev. Walker made use of the Center as an elected official, and in a few days the workers were meeting with Muhammad.

At the meeting with the two workers from Schlage Lock, Muhammad noticed that they "were mainly looking for an advocate on [their] behalf."[315] Muhammad informed them that BWFJ addressed problems in the workplace by "help[ing] organize workers to become their own major advocates." BWFJ argued that after the workers become "an organized force —clear on what their demands and interests are," they should "call upon ministers, elected officials, and others to support their demands and struggle."[316] This was not a theoretical or abstract position; BWFJ's approach to workers' rights was rooted in and informed by organizational practice. BWFJ had a history of empowering and building the leadership of Black workers from Kmart to Hardwood Dimensions Mill.

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[313] "BWFJ Opens Two Centers," *Justice Speaks*, June 1986, 6.
[314] Roscoe Barnes, "BWFJ Opens Center to honor Abner Berry," *The Nashville Graphic*, July 22, 1987, 8.
[315] Black Workers for Justice, *Organizing in the Schlage Lock Campaign: A Report from Black Workers for Justice* (Rocky Mount, 1988), 4.
[316] Ibid.

As Muhammad listened to the workers' concerns during their meeting at the Workers Center, he believed that if an effective movement was going to be waged against Schlage Lock's decision to close the plant, it had to be led by the workers. But if the workers were going to lead, their fear and lack of confidence about being agents of change had to be addressed. Despite articulating their concerns about their employer with passion and clarity, Muhammad maintained that the two workers "were not sure about their ability to bring more Schlage workers to the next meeting."[317] The workers certainly underestimated themselves. A few days after the small meeting with Muhammad, on March 23, 1988, the two workers were able to mobilize over one hundred and fifteen Schlage Lock workers to attend a meeting at BWFJ's Workers Center. The workers showed up in mass numbers and were so eager to meet and express their concerns that the front porch of the Workers Center collapsed. The one hundred plus workers who showed up to meet that day birthed a Black-led interracial movement against an unjust plant closing. The movement that was sparked had a positive impact on workers' consciousness in North Carolina and led to Black Workers for Justice launching its region wide campaign to organize southern workers into workers' organizations and trade unions.

For the most part, the scholarship on plant closings during the latter part of the twentieth century and its impact is geographically focused on the Midwest, North, and West Coast. Activist-scholar Eric Mann argues that despite being widespread during the 1980s "layoffs and plant closings were barely challenged."[318] If there was a fight against a plant closing, it was from a unionized workplace like the United Auto Workers Local 645 in California where Mann worked and organized. Examining the struggle at Schlage expands our understanding of the

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[317] Saladin to SEJ Staff, undated, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library.
[318] Eric Mann, *Taking on General Motors: A Case Study of the UAW campaign to Keep GM Van Nuys Open* (Los Angeles, 1987), 7.

1980s by uncovering the role of Black workers and a Black workers organization in a rare victory against a plant closing in the least expected region, the southern United States.[319] Furthermore, the struggle at Schlage Lock is deserving of scholarly exploration and is critical because it illuminates the effectiveness and craft of Black political organizing in the 1980s. That is, Schlage workers were successful not by luck or happenstance, but because they were organized.

At the time, on the economic front, the Rocky Mount area during the 1980s witnessed a downward shift in its economy. Close to a dozen plants had closed their doors before Schlage Lock with no accountability to its workers or the larger Rocky Mount community. Workers and the larger community were frustrated about the plants unjustly closing, but they were not organized, and frustration alone would not bring any justice or accountability. BWFJ and Saladin Muhammad, on the other hand, approached the Schlage Lock fight through "transformative organizing." According to Eric Mann, "transformative organizing recruits masses of people to fight militantly for immediate concrete demands that have to be won" and "works to transform the system, [and] transform the consciousness of the people being organized."[320] In the case of the Schlage Lock struggle, Saladin Muhammad filled the role of the transformative organizer by "bring[ing] new people into a movement to challenge the ideology, institutions, and policies of the system and is fighting for the most radical and revolutionary changes."[321]

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[319] The south and the southern freedom movement is important to a perspective of the Black 1980s because it is where the majority of African Americans lived. Therefore, if most Black people lived there, it should be at the center of our understanding about the Black experience. The south is also a region that decade's prior was the foundation of the African American freedom struggle and where movements for social change were sparked.

[320] Eric Mann, *Playbook for Progressives: 16 Qualities of the Successful Organizer* (Boston, 2011), x.

[321] Ibid., 2.

The significance and impact of transformative organizing can partially be understood in the six-month long Schlage Lock struggle. But at the heart of transformative organizing is what happens post campaign. After the workers won severance pay and other demands, the fight was not over. BWFJ saw the Schlage struggle as being in service to building a sustained worker-led movement in the South and setting the foundation for a campaign to Organize Southern workers. Leaders who were active in the Schlage Lock struggle became active leaders in the BWFJ, organizing other workers throughout Eastern North Carolina and the entire state. Even more, the Schlage struggle demonstrates how the slogan "Black Workers Take the Lead" was actualized in the Southern United States during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Despite employers throughout the South creating division among Black and White workers, the Schlage workers, with the support of BWFJ, were able to overcome that challenge and build a successful interracial workers movement.

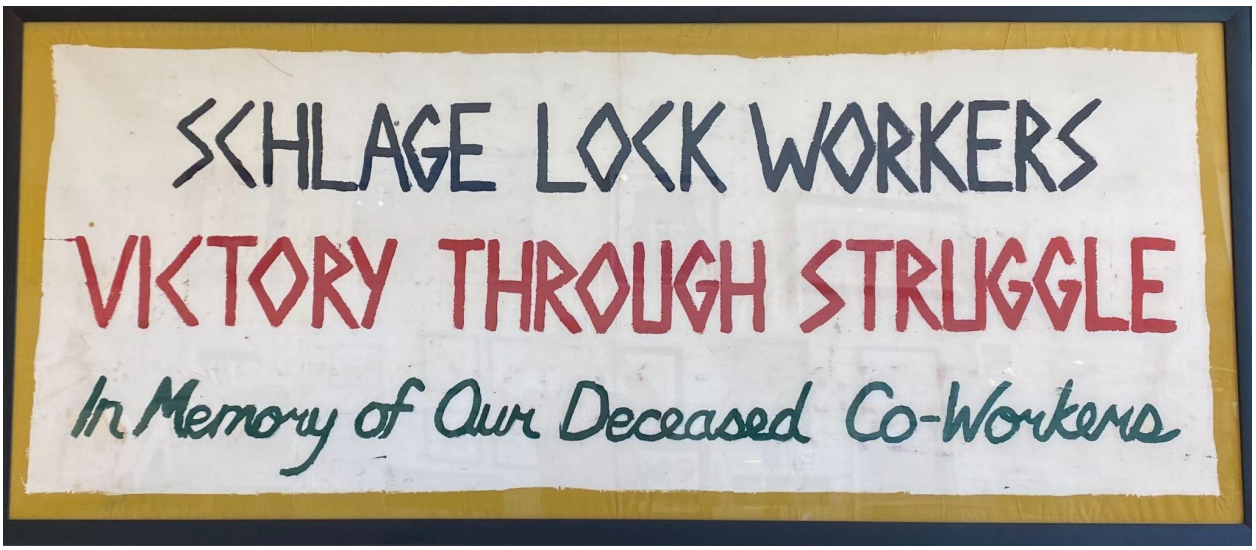

Figure 29: Photo of a Banner that was made during the Schlage Lock Struggle and that was framed at BWFJ's 40th Anniversary Celebration on May 21, 2022.

Another reason the Schlage Lock struggle is worthy of historical examination is because it confirms North Carolina's role of being at the center of the African American freedom struggle

of the twentieth century.[322] Known for its white supremacist violence, North Carolina is also known for sparking and giving new energy to the labor movement, students movement, and the environmental justice (EJ) movement. Given 80% of its workforce was Black and the groundwater that the plant contaminated impacted majority Black neighborhoods, I argue that the Schlage Lock struggle was also a fight against environmental racism. Put another way, the Schlage Lock struggle is important because it unraveled, for the first time since the birth of the EJ movement, the concrete connection between EJ, and workers' rights in North Carolina, and the South.[323] While Warren County, North Carolina is widely known as the birthplace of the EJ movement in 1982, this essay reveals how Schlage Lock made North Carolina the location of another important EJ struggle five years after Warren County, particularly due to the fact that it expanded the movement's area of concentration from fighting environmental racism in the community to now fighting environmental racism in the workplace.[324] The environmental consciousness that emerged from the Warren County struggle was connected to the environmental justice perspective that existed in the Schlage Lock campaign. In 1982, when dump trucks rolled into Warren County (a county with the highest number of Black residents in the state and located in the Black Belt) with contaminated soil laced with toxic PCB's, Saladin Muhammad was there protesting with the residents of the Eastern North Carolina County. Despite knowing that the Warren County site did not meet proper safety protocol and that the

[322] See Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003); Jelani M. Favors, *Shelter in a Time of Storm: How Black Colleges Fostered Generations of Leadership and Activism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2019); William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (Oxford, 1981).
[323] This is not to suggest that the labor movement had not made the connection between toxic chemicals and the workplace, see Josiah Rector, "Environmental Justice at Work: The UAW, the War on Cancer, and the Right to Equal Protection from Toxic Hazards in Postwar America" *Journal of American History* 101 (Fall 2014): 480-502.
[324] For more on Warren County, see Eileen McGurty, Transforming Environmentalism: Warren County, PCBs, and the Origins of Environmental Justice (New Brunswick, 2007).

PCB's in the soil were known to cause cancer, birth-defects, and other serious illnesses, the then-Governor Jim Hunt still approved the dumping. Through the leadership of local organizations, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Floyd McKissick, Rev. Ben Chavis, and the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice, the community protested by putting their bodies on the line. When the trucks entered Warren County escorted by state troopers, protesters laid in the middle of the road blocking the path of the trucks, leading to over five hundred arrests. A movement was born in Warren County that was being felt across the country.

This chapter contends that BWFJ played a crucial role in demonstrating the close relationship between EJ and workers' rights. As Saladin Muhammad stated "one thing for sure, the Schlage Lock workers realize that had they not formed an organization, then none of the issues would have been raised up to this point. That Schlage Lock would have walked out of this town or run out as were beginning to see, without doing anything about the contamination that it caused."[325] By empowering workers to be leaders in their struggle, it allowed for the struggle to be taken to a higher stage and guided by a deeper understanding of the worker's problems, concerns, and experiences. BWFJ brought to the 1980s a political perspective that was rooted in collective action and community organizing, not the individual activist or political campaigns that dominates our understanding of African Americans during that decade.

The Schlage Lock Company and Building a Movement Against Plant Closings

As a company within the Ingersoll-Rand Corporation, the Rocky Mount branch of the Schlage Lock Manufacturing Company was part of Ingersoll-Rand's bearings, locks, and tools division. Founded in 1905, Ingersoll-Rand was a merger between the Ingersoll-Sergeant Drill

[325] Saladin Muhammad to the Citizens Hearing on Schlage Lock Plant Closing, 28 June 1988, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library.

Company and the Rand Drill Company. Both drill companies were heavily involved in the rock drilling industry. Ingersoll-Sergeant used its drill for quarrying and tunnels, while Rand used his drills in the mining industry. When the two companies merged into Ingersoll-Rand, they became a multi-billion-dollar corporation and "the largest builder of air power machinery in the world."[326] Though they had mastered and became well-respected for their continued innovation as producers of rock drills and air compressors, by the 1970s, Ingersoll-Rand began to gain traction in the tools, locks, and bearings industries. Ingersoll-Rand acquired and merged with companies leading these industries and structured its organization into three main branches: bearings, locks, and tools, standard machinery, and engineered equipment. The corporation had "45 plants across the United States" and "30 international manufacturing operations."[327] Despite having success and obtaining mass profits, the Ingersoll-Rand Cooperation was not satisfied.

To make its mark in the lock industry, Ingersoll-Rand purchased Schlage Lock Manufacturing Company in 1975, three years after Schlage Lock opened its Rocky Mount plant. For most of its existence, the Rocky Mount facility employed seven hundred people and was an important employer to the local economy. Valued by the Rocky Mount community for its economic contributions, in 1972 and 1981, under the leadership of Ingersoll-Rand, Schlage Lock received a local bond for over ten million dollars.[328] Indeed, Schlage Lock provided hundreds of jobs to the Rocky Mount community, but Schlage Lock being in Rocky Mount was not a one-way street. The workers made Ingersoll-Rand millions. According to an Ingersoll-Rand finance

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[326] "Ingersoll-Rand," *Partners in Progress*, (New Jersey), undated, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library.
[327] Ibid., 419.
[328] "Fact Sheet Regarding Schlage Lock/Rocky Mount Plant Closing," undated, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library. It is important to know that these funds were public funds and were given to Schlage Lock with the promise of jobs.

report, "increased operating performance in the Door Hardware Group more than offset the somewhat flat performance reported by the Bearings and Components, and Tools groups."[329]

Despite the fact that Schlage lock was making high profits, in 1987 Ingersoll-Rand decided to downsize the Rocky Mount plant, lay off workers, announce the eventual closing of the plant, and deny workers any severance pay or extended health coverage. The company was moving the plant's operations to Mexico for cheaper labor and to exploit the Mexican workers. A lack of transparency and showing little concern about its workers was a regular practice in the Ingersoll-Rand corporation. In the early 1980s, Ingersoll-Rand launched a serious anti-union campaign and introduced a corporation-wide culture of mistreating workers. In June of 1985, David Wessel, a staff reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* reported that "30% of Ingersoll-Rand's U.S. production workers now are represented by unions, down from 60% at the end of 1981."[330] The drastic drop in union membership was not unique to Ingersoll-Rand or uncommon for the 1980s. Going into the decade, the trade union movement was in a crisis and not only losing its ability to negotiate fair contracts, but they also were also moving toward making top-down decisions and excluding the rank-and-file. Amid attacks faced by organized labor from the Reagan administration, the AFL-CIO lost over 4 million members. Still, roughly 30% of Black workers belonged to unions in the 1980s. For Ingersoll-Rand, they were enforcing the standard practice of companies from that time. Two reasons that union-represented employees decreased were because Ingersoll-Rand "moved production from union plants in the North to nonunion plants in the South" and the corporation withdrew "from businesses, including some that were

[329] Ingersoll-Rand Reports 70% Increase in Operating Profits, April 28, 1988, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library.
[330] David Wessel, "Fighting Off Unions, Ingersoll-Rand Uses, Wide Tactics: It Moves Plants, Drop Lines And Wins Worker Votes; Labor Is Hurt by Disunity," *Wall Street Journal,* June 13, 1985, 1.

heavily unionized."[331] At some unionized plants, Ingersoll-Rand led campaigns to decertify unions by encouraging management to talk bad about unions. In short, Schlage Lock felt that because the workers in Rocky Mount were not unionized, they could get away with and not be held accountable for denying workers severance pay or extended health insurance. Added on to Schlage Lock's belief that workers could be easily manipulated because they were not unionized, Schlage Lock felt they could mistreat its workforce because Black women made up over 70% of its workforce. Although the employees at Schlage Lock did not have a history of resistance or workers organizing, this did not prevent them from waging a mature and organized fight back. Though gender was not used as an organizing tool, the Schlage Lock campaign confirmed the widely held view that Black women were not only initiators of resistance, but they also maintained it.

When current and former employees of Schlage Lock gathered at BWFJ's Worker Center on March 22, 1988 they formed the Committee Against Schlage Lock Plant Closing (CASPC). For BWFJ this was huge. In November 1987, four months before the workers reached out to Rev. Walker for support, Schlage Lock made another one of its confusing and untransparent announcements that the plant would be closing. In response, BWFJ reached out to workers to organize a response, but were unsuccessful. By early 1988, still uncertain about the plant closing "Schlage Lock workers passed out a petition…demanding to be paid severance pay and benefits." Out of fear, most workers "withdrew their names from the petition."[332] Toward the end of March when layoffs kept happening and the plant was headed toward closing, the workers were ready to act. At the March 22 meeting, the workers not only committed themselves to

[331] Ibid.
[332] *The Schlage Lock Struggle: Its Meaning for Organizing the South*, (Rocky Mount, 1988), 2.

fighting the closing of their plant, but they had the opportunity at the meeting to express their frustrations, share stories, ask questions, and discuss the problems they experienced at the workplace. As workers engaged in a much-needed discussion about their working conditions and the need for unity, Saladin Muhammad remembered when the topic of unity was put on the table, a White worker said: "you cant get White workers to pass a bucket to each other if somebody's house was on fire." A Black woman worker in attendance responded with "I thought that was only us." While the exchange between the White and Black workers brought welcomed laughter to the meeting, it led to a serious and important question about unity. A White worker asked Muhammad "this is the black workers for justice center isn't it?…you know we have Black and White workers at Schlage lock." Muhammad responded with "yes, I am aware." Years later, Muhammad recalled that two White workers "were pretty insistent that the black workers for justice would be favoring Black workers and that they would not be fought for." Muhammad stressed to the two concerned workers that "black workers for justice is talking about justice for all workers, but for too long many White workers when they achieve something, they stop even before black workers achieve something. I said we want to make sure that is not the case with this workers struggle." In response, a White worker simply stated: "well that makes sense."[333]

Once clarity was established on the importance of Black workers' leadership, the Schlage workers formed the CASPC, voted on a list of demands, collectively decided on a plan of action, and established four committees to help guide their fight back. As an experienced organizer would do, Muhmmad helped facilitate an organizational culture that encouraged and empowered workers to take an active leadership role in their struggle and be the primary decision makers. Two Schlage Lock workers agreed to be on the information committee that was tasked with

[333] Saladin Muhammad, "Schlage Lock Interview," December 15, 2019, interviewed by Ajamu Dillahunt, recording in possession of the author, Raleigh, NC.

"gather[ing] information about other issues relating to Schlage such as industrial revenue bonds, workplace injuries and dangerous working conditions, where the plant is moving to and wages, etc."[334] Five Schlage Lock workers joined the complaint committee that sought to "gather any complaints from Schlage workers about harassment in connection with their plant closing struggle and in general."[335] Two workers joined the outreach committee "to broaden the base of support by contacting churches, unions, community groups, etc."[336] Lastly, five Schlage Lock workers joined the first action committee "to represent Schlage workers at an attempted meeting with the Schlage plant manager."[337] Through these committees, workers had a level of responsibility in their struggle. Operating with little to no resources, the workers passed around a bucket to collect donations for the upcoming worker activities. BWFJ knew that if change was going to take place, the most powerful and disenfranchised had to be empowered: the workers.

The First Action Committee immediately acted on planning a meeting with Schlage Lock management. The next day, on March 23, 1988, workers arrived at work at 6:30 am, thirty minutes before their shift started, to meet with the plant manager. When over fifty workers showed up at the plant manager's office, he refused to meet with them collectively and only said he would meet with workers individually. For the fifty plus Schlage Lock workers who showed up for the meeting, this sent a clear message that their demands and struggle needed public support. Later that day, at 3:30pm during a shift change, over one hundred workers gathered in Schlage Lock's parking lot for a press conference.

[334] Saladin to SEJ Staff, undated, Wilson Special Collection Library.
[335] Ibid.
[336] Ibid.
[337] Ibid.

Figure 30: Photo of Corrine Hamm at the Press Conference of Schlage Lock Workers on March 23, 1988. Photo Source: The Evening Telegram.

The workers shared with the press their demands for "severance pay for all workers," "stay in place bonus," "6 months extended health/dental coverage," "6 months extended life insurance," "a statement of the financial status of the Schlage lock company over the past three years," and "10 hour vacation pay for all workers to be laid off on March 31, 1988."[338] Being that it was a shift change and a high volume of workers were in a centralized location, BWFJ members helped pass out the press release and the newly formed CASPC was able to recruit other workers to their cause.

That same day, the Schlage workers called an evening meeting at the Workers Center that was attended by over one hundred workers. Some had attended the first meeting, and some had just been recruited from the press conference earlier that day. For this second mass meeting, the

[338] Press Release: Committee Against Schlage Lock Plant Closing March 23, 1988, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library; S. Muhammed, "Schlage Lock Workers Fight Back: Powerful Campaign Sheds Light on Company's Plan to Close," *Justice Speaks*, April 1988, 1;Ernest Seneca, "Layoffs: Schlage Lock Co. criticized by employees," *The Evening Telegram*, March 24, 1988, 1.

CASPC debriefed the press conference, the attempted meeting with Schlage Lock's plant manager, and structured the meeting so that workers who missed the first meeting had the opportunity to share their concerns about the plant closing.

The summation of its activities led the CASPC to concentrate on and be more intentional about gaining community support for its demands. For them, a struggle only concentrated in the workplace would not have been enough to successfully organize against a company that would not meet with its concerned workers. The organizing plan and direction provided by BWFJ helped CASPC determine that the time was right to broaden out their struggle and seek community support. Since its founding BWFJ has operated as a "workplace-based community organization" and they encouraged the Schlage Lock workers to do the same. Now that the workers had achieved a strong level of self-organization and were able to collectively advocate for themselves, "it was decided that the struggle should broaden its base and try to get the elected officials in Rocky Mount, Edgecombe and Nash counties, and state representatives to intervene on the side of the workers' demands."[339] To encourage urgent action among elected officials, the CASPC decided to launch a petition that would be presented to city council and other local and statewide elected officials at a special mass meeting. The workers gave themselves four days to collect 5,000 signatures. At the end of the fourth day Saladin Muhammad "could not believe it." The workers went to neighborhoods, different workplaces, and churches and collected over 5,000 signatures in four days.

During that time, the Schlage Lock workers attended a breakfast organized by the Rocky Mount Interdenominal Ministerial Alliance. At the breakfast, "the ministers stated their support for the Schlage workers and agreed to hold a prayer service on March 27, 1988…in support of

[339] Saladin to SEJ Staff, undated, Wilson Special Collection Library.

the Schlage Lock demands around the plant closing."[340] Following the prayer and support from the ministers, the workers mobilized and did a phone blitz for a mass meeting on March 30 with elected officials.

At the meeting on March 30, the workers delivered the over 5,000 signatures they received and secured verbal agreement from elected officials that they would work with Schlage Lock to hold them accountable. To no surprise, the elected officials present did not follow through with their commitments. That same day, 100 Schlage workers were laid off. In response, the CASPC released a statement opposing the layoffs and firmly asserting their commitment to fighting the company. The CASPC let the press and company know that they "are united, the workers laid off and the workers still in the plant; Blacks Whites, males, females; old and young. Together we will win." To show their commitment and eagerness to fight the plant closing, the workers met every Tuesday to make collective decisions and strategize on how to best achieve their goal. The CASPC was ready to engage in a long-term fight back as a group of organized workers.

More Than a Struggle Against a Plant Closing: The Fight Against Toxic Chemicals and for Environmental Justice

March 30, 1988 was a big day for the Schlage Lock workers. In response to the workers being laid off, the CASPC not only released a statement opposing the layoffs, but they also launched a daily picket of the Schlage Lock plant.[341] BWFJ wrote in a pamphlet about the pickets that:

> Sometimes as many as 80 workers would join the picket line after work. Schlage workers were also supported by workers from other plants in the area who would join the picket

[340] Program for Prayer Service for Standard Products and Schlage Lock Workers, March 27, 1988, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library; Committee Against Schlage Lock Plant Closing Development and Activities, undated, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library.
[341] Ernest Seneca, "Schlage Lock employees picket Wednesday," *The Evening Telegram*, March 31, 1988, 1.

> line. The picket would last for one hour and then be taken to downtown Rocky Mount. There the workers and their supporters would stand in front of City Hall for one hour daily…Leafleting was also done at various plants to educate and gain the support of workers throughout the greater Rocky Mount area.[342]

At the first picket on March 30, Patty Williams, who had been working at Schlage Lock for ten years, told reporters that "we risked our lives working with deadly chemicals for Schlage." Williams "said she was concerned about health factors" because "seven former workers have died of cancer."[343] With her comments, Williams took the Schlage Lock fight to a new stage of struggle.

At their weekly meetings, workers noticed they were having similar health problems. As a result, they decided to send around a health questionnaire to better understand the health status of their co-workers. The survey results confirmed that the health concerns raised by Williams at the press conference required some further investigation. The Committee "decided to raise the health issues in the campaign." At this stage, the Schlage Lock struggle was now not only a struggle against a plant closing but also a struggle against toxic chemicals and environmental neglect.

BWFJ was uniquely positioned to help further identify what was causing common health problems among the workers. At the time of the struggle, Saladin Muhammad had been employed by Southerners for Economic Justice (SEJ). Early on in its history, BWFJ approached employment in a strategic manner; they got jobs that helped position them to be of service to and organize the Black working class. Muhammad working with SEJ made sense. SEJ was founded in 1976 supporting the unionization of workers in the textile industry. During Muhammad's employment, SEJ was under the leadership of a seasoned civil and workers' rights activist, Leah

[342] Black Workers for Justice, *Organizing in the Schlage Lock Campaign*, 5.
[343] Seneca, "Schlage Lock employees picket Wednesday," 2.

Wise. Wise, having been active in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and a worker in the steel industry, she understood the importance BWFJ's organizing methodology and put organizational resources towards fighting the plant closing. Under Wise's leadership, SEJ had a close relationship with Bob Hall and the Institute for Southern Studies (ISS), a research organization founded by Julian Bond and other Civil Rights Movement veterans. The institute published *Southern Exposure*, a quarterly journal that highlighted the southern freedom movement and progressive southern culture. Through its publication of *Southern Exposure* and other research, the institute provided "the information, the ideas, and historical understanding of Southern social struggles necessary for long-term fundamental change."[344] In other words, the institute conducted research in service of the movement for social transformation. When Schlage workers needed information on the company, the institute's director Bob Hall and other researchers in their network provided the workers with information to help guide their struggle.

For example, on April 5, Joseph T. Hughes Jr., a researcher with a master's degree in public health from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill presented a paper to the CASPC titled "Report to the Workers of Schlage Company." In it, he brought to the attention of the workers that "In July 1986, tests by scientists with the NC Division of Health Services found that the groundwater monitoring wells at Schlage Lock in Rocky Mount were contaminated with significant amounts of cancer-causing chemicals." Hughes Jr., was also able to find a report on a groundwater test conducted by Schlage Lock in 1983 that identified high levels of "total chromium and hexavalent chromium." According to Hughes Jr. "both these substances are suspected cancer-causing agents as well." A major take away from his report was that the "over

[344] "*Sunbelt Blues: Where Have all the Good Jobs gone?," Southern Exposure,* Fall 1990.

3,000 people who drink the groundwater within a three-mile radius of Schlage Lock" could be impacted by this contaminated water.[345]

With this information, the CASPC along with BWFJ did two things. First, they went to the neighborhoods that were in the three-mile radius of Schlage Lock and informed them about possible contamination to their drinking water. While informing them about the contamination, they invited them to a community meeting.[346] This was done to have the community members impacted by Schlage Lock's environmental carelessness feel part of and connected to the workers' fight back. The second action item that was taken after hearing the report from Hughes Jr. was outreach to elected officials. On April 7, two days after receiving the report, the CASPC met with the Mayor of Rocky Mount, Fred Turnage. While six workers met with the mayor, fifty other workers were holding "signs outside of his law office."[347] Turnage showed little to no concern about the workers' fight for severance pay or environmental justice and took no initiative to aid their cause. Despite limited action from the mayor, the Human Relations Committee accepted complaints from Schlage Lock workers and took them to a meeting with Schlage Lock management.

Clearly the workers were exhausting all options and were not letting Schlage Lock close its plant without a fight. On April 13, just a week after learning of the report, the CASPC held a mass meeting "to hear workers speak about [their exposure to toxic chemicals and] their health problems they have contracted since working at Schlage."[348] This mass meeting was important

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[345] Joseph T. Hughes Jr., *Report to the Workers of Schlage Lock Company*, April 5, 1988, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library.
[346] "CHC, Blooming Hill Demand Schlage Clean Up" Justice Speaks, June 1988, 2; *Organizing in the Schlage Lock Campaign: A Report from Black Workers for Justice,* 5-6. It is also important to note that there was a proposed waste site to be considered in the Black part of Rocky Mount during the same time as the Schlage Lock struggle.
[347] "Workers protest," *The Evening Telegram*, April 7, 1988, 1.
[348] Committee Against Schlage Lock Plant Closing Development and Activities, Wilson Special Collection Library.

because it was attended by elected officials on the local, county, and state level. Workers had made phone calls to elected officials urging them to take action. Representative Joe Mavretic of Tarboro, North Carolina told those at the meeting that "his phone was burning off the hook" from the calls he was receiving from workers. Mavretic brought clarity about the workers' pensions. He told them that their "pension benefits are property rights..they belong to you."[349] Another elected official, Senator James Ezzell of Nash, also gave workers advice on how to achieve some form of justice. He and Mavretic told the workers that on the legislative front, "Joe and I will do whatever we can to help as well."[350] While the city councilman who was in attendance agreed to take the issue back to council, the director of economic development for Nash County, Jim Jablonski, was more concerned with how CASPC's protests were impacting other industries from coming to the area than the workers' well-being. Excluding Jablonski, the workers received good feedback and support from the elected officials in attendance.

Now clear on their pension rights, the CASPC took the struggle against Schlage Lock beyond the Rocky Mount plant and began to challenge its parent company. Equipped with the information from Mavretic, the workers called Ingersoll-Rand, making claims to their pension rights, and inquiring about the shareholders' meeting. At Ingersoll-Rand, workers were shareholders, which meant that legally they were owners in the corporation and had a voice and vote in major decisions impacting Ingersoll-Rand's future. In late April, with the support of BWFJ and Saladin Muhammad, the CASPC took a delegation of workers to the shareholders meeting in New Jersey. Although they called to reserve a spot to speak at the meeting,

[349] Roscoe Barnes III, "Rep. Joe Mavretic Pledges his support," *The Nashville Graphic*, April 15, 1988; Roscoe Barnes III, "Jablonski seeks to calm crowd," *The Nashville Graphic*, April 15, 1988; Ernest Seneca "Schlage employees raise chemical leak concerns," The Rocky Mount Telegram, April 15, 1988.
[350] Barnes III, "Rep. Joe Mavretic Pledges his support."

"Ingersoll-Rand officials attempted to close the meeting without hearing from the workers."[351] Having driven over six hours, the workers refused to be passed over. Before the meeting was over, the workers made sure the corporation's top officials heard their concerns about the unjust plant closing and the environmental and health crisis caused by Schlage. As a result of their comments, some shareholders expressed support for the workers and Ingersoll-Rand agreed to further investigate the plant closing.

May Day, Health Screenings, and the Public Hearing

Indeed, gaining support from some shareholders was a positive development for the CASPC. At the same time, the workers returned to Rocky Mount with the view that their fight was far from over. On May 1, 1988, CASPC organized "May Day: Area-Wide Mobilization for Workers' Rights and Economic Justice."

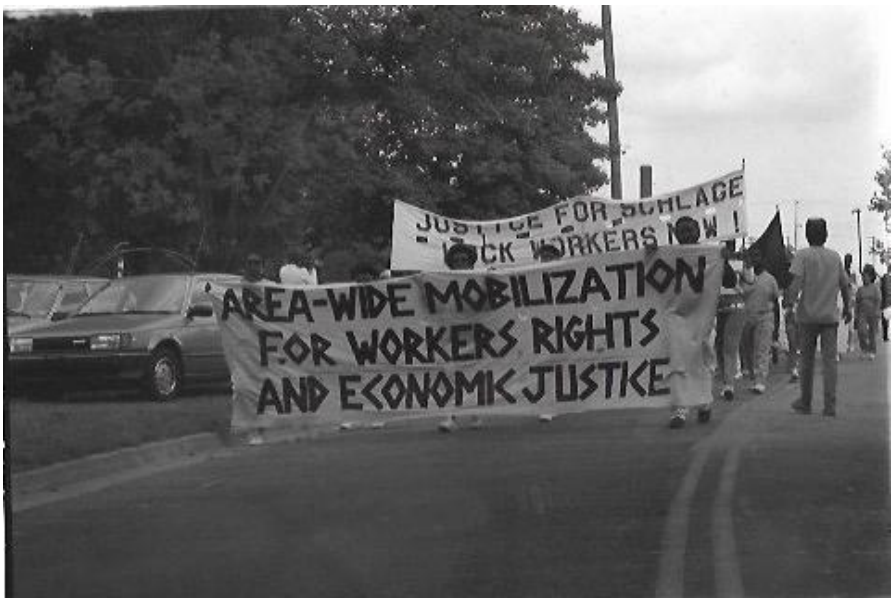

Figure 31: The lead banner at the May Day march on May 1, 1988, in Rocky Mount that mobilized over three hundred workers and community leaders. Photo Source: The Communiversity.

[351] *Organizing in the Schlage Lock Campaign: A Report from Black Workers for Justice,* 6.

Deciding to organize this action on May Day, also widely known as International Workers Day, was an indication that the Schlage Lock struggle identified itself as part of a world-wide workers movement fighting for better wages, working conditions, and an end to mistreatment by corporations. Mobilizing for May Day connected the Schlage Lock workers to a revolutionary and militant worker tradition. This May Day was so important because the march and rally mobilized roughly three hundred people from Rocky Mount and the surrounding area. As part of the rally and march, the crowd marched and spoke in front of City Hall and the Chamber of Commerce.[352] At different locations throughout the march, there were over a dozen speakers. Schlage Lock workers, labor activists, workers from different workplaces, elected officials, and faith leaders spoke at the area wide mobilization. While the remarks from all the speakers were significant, Rev. Walker's comments are particularly important because he encouraged the concerned Schlage Lock workers to reach out to BWFJ at the beginning of their struggle in March and remained an active supporter of their demands. In fact, he was the only elected official to support the workers' May Day march and rally. In his speech, Rev. Walker told the crowd "it is very important that we are here today to struggle." Eager to point out the contradiction of the plant closing, Rev. Walker continued his remarks by reminding the workers and the community that "we haven't even organized for a union. But yet they closed down." What Rev. Walker meant by this was "that so many times there are those who don't want unions to come to our area and they argue that if you are trying to get a union, the plant is going to close down and leave town. This plant is closing down and leaving town and you have not organized for a union."

[352] Akinshiju C. Ola, "Workers Movement Builds; Celebrates May Day," *Justice Speaks*, May 1988, 1-2; "The Real Labor Day," *Justice Speaks*, May 1988, 2.

Figure 32: Saladin Muhammad of Black Workers for Justice passionately speaking at the May Day Rally in Support of the Schlage Lock workers. Photo Source: The Communiversity.

At one point, the police tried to stop the march, but the participants kept marching. In his remarks, Rev. Walker expressed his firm opposition to the police officers attempt interrupt the marches' powerful expression of workers' power. For him, the actions taken by the police was "another demonstration of how this city and how this area regards its workers." Muhammad had applied for a permit to march but was told he did not need one. When the police tried to stop them, they said they did not have a permit and could not march on the street. Rev. Walker shared with the crowd that "I have been in a lot of marches in this city, and we marched right down the street for causes not even as important as this one. So, I think that is another signal of how you are being looked upon here in this city." It was his thinking that the confusion and carelessness from the city "ought to motivate us to keep on struggling because a people united will never be defeated."[353]

[353] Ibid.

As Rev. Walker noted, on numerous occasions the city showed its lack of concern for the Schlage Lock workers' demands. Beyond their effort to interrupt the march, local and statewide elected officials showed little to no worry about the health of the Schlage Lock workers. When it was discovered that Schlage Lock contaminated the groundwater and exposed workers to toxic, cancer-causing chemicals, the mayor, nor the county health department, felt it was their responsibility to do anything. City officials were prepared to let Schlage Lock leave the area with no clarity on the damages they caused, both environmentally and health-wise. The Schlage Lock workers did not accept that. In collaboration with their supporters, the Schlage Lock workers organized their own medical screening.[354]

Held on Saturday, May 21, 1988 at BWFJ's Worker Center, the health screening mobilized eighty Schlage Lock workers. Though the company tried to delegitimize the screening by asking "will the screening even have real doctors?" BWFJ surmised that the screening was "a success."[355] The company's suggestion that there would be no "real" doctors was an uninformed insult. The physician leading the screening was Dr. Marty Nathan, a family doctor who was practicing at Memorial Hospital in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.[356] Before the screening, workers had expressed having similar health problems with their "skin, eyes, nose, throat and lungs."[357] Based on her medical examination, Dr. Nathan concluded that the symptoms that workers were experiencing were consistent with the harmful impacts associated with the chemicals they were exposed too.

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[354] Jerry Allegood, "Former Schlage workers to be screened for job-related illnesses," *The News and Observer*, May 11, 1988; Gene Downs Jr, "Worker's screening scheduled: Reported health problems at Schlage prompt action," The Rocky Mount Telegram, May 11, 1988, 11.
[355] "Workers Health Screening: Success!" *Justice Speaks*, May 1988, 1-2.
[356] Dr. Nathan had a history of participating in the movement for social change. In 1979, her husband was killed in the Greensboro Massacre where the Klan and Nazi Party with the support of the local police opened fire on members of the Communist Workers Party.
[357] "Workers Health Screening: Success!," 2.

According to Dr. Nathan, "64% [of workers] reported frequent headaches experienced while at work. 39% of the workers reported dizziness, usually occurring with the headaches, and four or 5% reported visual changes–blurring or seeing double." Dr. Nathan further found that "45% reported upper respiratory (mouth, throat and nose) irritation on the job, frequently associated with breathing fumes. Thirteen workers reported nosebleeds (16%), 30% reported throat irritation, 28% had sinus problems associated with work." Even more concerning from her findings is that "32 (41%) described developing either shortness of breath, cough, wheezing, or chest tightness on the job." Dr. Nathan asserted that "these are symptoms of lung irritation." Other important information that Dr. Nathan included was that "twenty-five workers had developed rashes on the job, representing 32% of those questioned" and "21% or 17 workers described numbness or tingling sensations in their arms or legs." One of the chemicals that workers were exposed to could cause "damage to the nerves of the arms and legs."[358] Dr. Nathan concluded her report with suggestions for long-term medical investigation. She found that 29% of workers had tests done that "indicat[ed] some liver damage."[359]

While the results of the health screening could not provide a definitive position on the workers overall health, it did corroborate that the health concerns that the workers had were medically valid and that workers' health had suffered due to their time working at Schlage Lock. Dr. Nathan was doing the screenings as a volunteer and had limited medical assistance and resources. Resources were so limited that Schlage workers had to sell fish plates to pay for the lab work and blood tests performed at the screening. The city and county failed the Schlage Lock

[358] Martha Nathan, M.D., "May 21, 1988 screening of Schlage Lock Workers," undated, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library; "Workers study: 45 percent suffer respiratory illness," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, June 22, 1988, 13.
[359] Ibid.

workers but through their drive and commitment to justice and fairness, they found an alternative route to bring to the surface the harm done to their health.

Since the birth of their campaign, the Schlage Lock workers had been demanding the city host a comprehensive public hearing on the impact that the plant closing would have on the workers and the larger Rocky Mount community, but the elected officials took no action. By June, just three months after their first meeting with BWFJ, the CASPC adopted the same philosophy it did with the health screenings and decided to organize its own public hearing for June 28, 1988. In preparation for their independently organized public hearing, the workers reached out to elected officials again, urging them to participate. Janice Holder, a former Schlage Lock worker, gave a passionate speech in front of the Nash County Commissioner.[360] Holder told the County Commissioners that she "had to see my doctor 21 times in the past 5 years for a sinus condition. 12 of our co-workers that we now know of, have died of cancer and 4 are fighting cancers." Frustrated by the county commissioner's inaction and silence, Holder proclaimed that "we are concerned that there has been no apparent effort on the part of the Nash County Commissioners to address these issues."[361] The county told the CASPC that "there is nothing that this body could do." At one of the CASPC's pickets, the county industrial developer drove by "giving workers the thumbs down sign and sticking out his tongue [at workers]."[362] To close out, Holder invited the commissioners to the public hearing and told them, "It is time they take a stand for the people."[363]

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[360] Gene Downs Jr., "Former Schlage Lock Employee brings concerns to commissioners," *The Rocky Mount Telegram*, June 7, 1988, 9.
[361] Janice Holder to Nash County Board of Commissioners Meeting, June 6, 1988, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library.
[362] Ibid; Downs Jr., "Former Schlage Lock Employee brings concerns to commissioners," 9.
[363] Janice Holder, June 17, 1988, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library.

In preparation for the hearing, an eleven-person citizens panel was organized to hear and make recommendations based on testimonies from workers and their family members, environmental experts, medical experts, legal experts, labor experts, and other workers. The citizen's panel was composed of a diverse group of community leaders and chaired by Rev. Leon White, Southern director, United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice (CRJ). Under Rev. White's leadership the CRJ led the EJ struggle in Warren County six years prior. Having him on the panel connected the Schlage Lock struggle to the larger movement for environmental justice.

Figure 33: The Citizens Panel at the Schlage Public Hearing on June 28, 1988. These panelists heard testimonies and asked follow-up questions to facilitate clarity and understanding about the plant closing. Photo Source: The Communiversity.

If there were any uncertainties about the CASPC's rightful struggle against Schlage Lock, the public hearing put any doubt about the workers' cause to rest. In his opening remarks as chairman of the public hearing, Rev. Leon White told the audience that although the panel "look[ed] formal" and sought to be "objective," all the panelists were there to "seek justice for

our community and the people who live in this area."[364] Following his opening remarks, the panel called forward Schlage Lock workers to hear their testimonies. The workers spoke about when they came to Schlage Lock to work, not being notified by the company if the plant was really closing, and their health conditions. One worker summed up what all the workers seemed to be feeling. Bee Harrington told the panel that "I worked for so many years and I just feel something needs to be done."[365]

Figure 34: The audience at the Public Hearing held at the OIC Building in Rocky Mount on June 28, 1988. Photo Source: The Communiversity.

Following the testimony of the workers, Bob Hall from the ISS was called forward. Hall had put together and passed out a packet of information on Schlage Lock. Included in the packet was a document that he wrote titled "Schlage Lock Shutdown: Issues and Facts." As part of this document, Bob did deep research into Schlage Lock's past and found that exposing workers to

[364] Rev. Leon White to the Citizens Hearing on Schlage Lock Plant Closing, 20 June 1988, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library.
[365] Bee Harrington to the Citizens Hearing on Schlage Lock Plant Closing, 20 June 1988, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library.

toxic chemicals and committing environmental neglect was not new for the company. Hall wrote that in Colorado, where another Schlage Lock plant was located and where the state enforced the Occupational Safety & Health Act (unlike North Carolina), Schlage Lock had "been frequently cited for violations of the Act. In a nine-month period, from August 1979 through April 1980, it received 10 separate citations and fines of more than $5,000 for 'serious' violations." He added that the "violations included exposure of workers in the polishing and buffing area to levels of copper dust in excess of 18 times of allowable limits; exposure of workers to excessive levels of airborne lead; [and] exposure to excessive sound levels from a jolt squeeze molder." Schlage Lock also failed "to provide workers with proper respiratory protection; exposure to excessive levels of tetrachloroethylene; and failure to institute a medical surveillance program for all employees who are or may be exposed to lead above the action level for more than 30 days per year."[366]

In his report, Hall stressed that exposing workers to toxic chemicals was not the only health and environmental violation committed by Schlage Lock in Colorado. Hall discovered that "The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) filed suit against Schlage Lock in July 1987 for discharging wastewater contaminated with nickel and chrome into a public sewage treatment facility." He also found that "The company had failed to comply with standards in the federal Clean Water Act by the target date of February 1986. In fact, Schlage's own reports showed it was still discharging excessive levels of heavy metals more than a year after that date."[367]

Hall's written report brought more context and justification behind the health concerns raised at the health screening. If Schlage Lock was doing it to the workers in Colorado and had a

[366] Bob Hall, "Schlage Lock Plant Shutdown: Issues & Facts," June 13, 1988, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library.
[367] Ibid.

lawsuit filed against them for environmental contamination, it made sense that they were doing the same thing in Rocky Mount too. Hall's report moved the struggle and knowledge of the health and environmental impact that Schlage Lock caused in Rocky Mount from the stage of speculation and investigation to the stage of confirmation and clarity. With these powerful testimonies from experts, researchers, and workers, the eleven-person panel listened, learned, and planned to take the information from the public hearing and take action on it. Rev. Leon White told the participants at the public hearing and the CASPC that "justice will be served and that the panel will try to come up with a solution to their problems."[368]

The citizens panel that was organized for the public hearing met on several occasions to follow up on Rev. White's commitment to finding a solution for the workers and their problems. On August 7, the panel met and decided to call themselves the Citizens Commission on Plant Closings (CCPC). As the CCPC, they planned to request a meeting with Schlage Lock and put together a report on the information gathered at the public hearing. In addition to meeting with Schlage Lock, the CCPC began to discuss the possibility of doing policy work around plant closings beyond Schlage Lock. Once it was decided on how they would function as a committee, they divided up roles and agreed to meet in late August. While the efforts of the CCPC were great and would have been powerful, Schlage Lock had caved into the pressure applied by the CASPC and its supporters.

Organize the South: Key Lessons from the Schlage Lock Campaign for the Southern Workers Movement

On August 17, *The Evening Telegram* published an article by staff writer Joseph Allen titled "Schlage Lock Manager Outlines clean-up and employee efforts." Schlage Lock officials

[368] "Schlage workers speak at public hearing," *The Evening Telegram*, June 29, 1988, 1.

announced that by September "the company is going to pay out the present value of all pension accounts for employees who worked for the company on or after Jan. 1, 1987." Meaning, over 500 workers would be receiving their full pension and severance pay. The company said it would hire an industrial doctor to provide exams for former employees. On top of that, the company also said it would conduct "a major clean up and on-going monitoring of the chemical contamination caused by the company."[369] Certainly news that is worthy of celebration and understood as a victory for the workers, but the CASPC did not let up just yet. Three days later, they held a press conference demanding a "written and signed letter that clearly states what services and benefits the company will provide." Their reasoning was because "the letter would give former workers a means of legal resource if Schlage did not provide the services it committed too." At the press conference Saladin Muhammad spoke and made sure the press, community, and other workers knew that the commitment that Schlage Lock made to its workers was only possible because of the work of CASPC. He also made sure they knew that "while Schlage workers have won a victory thus far, our struggle is not yet over, and we are prepared to picket and continue to expose corporate injustices until we have been fairly treated by the Schlage company."[370]

Muhammad's assertion that "our struggle is not yet over" was referring to more than just making sure that Schlage Lock stayed true to their word. Muhammad and BWFJ knew that the Schlage Lock struggle and what it represented had to continue post-campaign. The workers and the organizing they engaged in had an undeniable and positive impact on worker consciousness in Eastern North Carolina. The CASPC was having such a large influence that management at

[369] Joseph Allen, "Schlage Lock manager outlines clean-up and employee efforts," The Evening Telegram, August 17, 1988, 15.
[370] Joseph Allen, "Schlage workers want recourse should promise fail," *The Evening Telegram*, August 20, 1988, 1.

different workplaces started to post notices and hold meetings informing workers of what they are "entitled to if their plant should change owners or close."[371] A few months after the Schlage Lock victory, workers at a drapery store in Rocky Mount were notified that the company would be closing the plant later that year. Concerned that they would not receive severance pay or their pensions, workers from the soon-to-be closed plant met with former Schlage Lock workers at BWFJ's workers' center. Given its recent success, lessons from the CASPC were sought out by and of high interest from workers struggling on the shop floor.

BWFJ, in conjunction with the leadership of the CASPC, felt that the Schlage Lock struggle offered a strategic and unique opportunity to build a strong workers movement in the region. Several months after the Schlage Lock workers won their victory, Muhammad sent a letter out to former workers inviting them to a meeting to be part of the newly formed Schlage Lock Workers for Justice (SWFJ). It was decided to build this permanent organization of former Schlage Lock workers to "help maintain the unity of the former Schlage workers and provide them with training, information and basic resources to deal with problems they may encounter at the new places of work."[372] For BWFJ, on the other hand, the Schlage Lock victory gave them confidence in their organizing methodology and confirmed that building a "workplace-based community struggle" with rank-and-file leadership can help break the stronghold of the anti-union culture in the South.

BWFJ did not waste time. The organization began to seriously consider what a national campaign to organize southern workers could look like at a time when a strong workers movement was being built and achieving major victories in North Carolina. To determine the

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[371] "Schlage Workers Build for Public Hearing," *Justice Speaks*, June 1988, 5.

[372] Saladin Muhammad to Former Schlage Lock Employees, February 13, 1989, box 116, Bob Hall Papers 1960s-2019, Wilson Special Collection Library.

readiness of the larger labor movement for a campaign to organize the south, BWFJ led a widely attended session on “organizing the south” at a conference organized by the labor magazine *Labor Notes* in May 1989. According to *Justice Speaks*, the Schlage Lock story captured people's attention and generated overwhelming excitement about strides being made in the southern labor movement. Two months later in July 1989, BWFJ hosted a Workers' School in Eastern North Carolina. The most impactful portion of the Workers' School took place that night at the BWFJ sponsored Workers Speak out at Ebenezer Baptist Church. There, roughly 75 workers showed up and talked about issues they were facing on the job. As a result of the workers' speak out and listening to the workers describe common problems in different workplaces in Eastern North Carolina, BWFJ decided to take the energy from the event and launch the Workers Want Fairness Campaign (WWFC) that built workplace committees in over twelve different plants in Eastern North Carolina.

The attendees at the workers' school who were not from the South formed solidarity committees in the Midwest, Northeast, and West Coast. The solidarity committees organized “Organize the South” Solidarity Tours to allow southern workers to expose the country to the inhumane working conditions in the South and the urgent need for international unions to invest in organizing southern workplaces. For the West Coast Solidarity Tour, the Schlage Lock struggle came back full circle. Joan Sharpe, a former Schlage Lock worker and now a leader in BWFJ, participated in the Tour in California. As part of the Tour, Sharpe had the opportunity to visit the new Schlage Lock plant in Mexico. Doing more than just visiting, Sharpe had the opportunity to talk with the Mexican workers about things to be mindful of when working for Schlage. During the workers' lunch break, Sharpe and other BWFJ members passed out a leaflet in English and Spanish encouraging and promoting the need for workers to form a union. As part

of her conversation with the Mexican workers at Schlage Lock, Sharpe provided context for why as a former employee it was essential for workers to form a union. Sharpe told them that over thirty of her co-workers died of cancer because they were exposed to toxic cancer-causing chemicals at Schlage Lock and was not informed by the company. Serious about building solidarity and no more workers being harmed by Schlage Lock, "Joan brought 200 pages of documents with her that described Schlage's use of toxic chemicals, it's contamination of the groundwater, and Schlage's failure to provide promised severance pay for production workers."[373]

BWFJ was successful because it had a firm understanding of history and the unique organizing approach required when organizing southern workers. For the most part, trade unions and other worker organizations sought to organize the South based on what worked in the North.[374] Early on, when the Schlage Lock workers expressed that they wanted to take action against the plant closing, some economic justice and public policy groups suggested that a coalition be formed that replicated how plant closings were fought in the North and Midwest. BWFJ understood this as making the same error as past movements and urged against it. Muhammad and BWFJ argued that a coalition could be built like that in the North because workers were unionized "giving them organized representation within those coalitions." The Schlage Lock workers did not have that and if a coalition of businesspeople, clergy, and other groups would have been the main bases of the struggle, BWFJ thought it would be unsuccessful and undermine the collective voice of the workers. Instead, to deal with the uniqueness of

[373] Martin Eder, "Displaced Worker Offers Solidarity in Tecate, Mexico," *The Working Peoples' News*, May 1992, 1 and 5.
[374] See Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988); Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Key: Class, Race, & Radicalism in the 1930 & 1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

organizing southern workers, BWFJ structured "the organizing strategy of the campaign focused on building a rank and file workers organization (Committee Against Schlage Plant Closing) as the central leadership of the struggle, with a clear set of democratically arrived at demands, a democratic decision making process enabling broad Schlage worker input and a participation, and a basic leadership structure with co-chairs and working sub-committees; and through the mobilization of the membership build a popular are wide workplace and community based campaign." BWFJ deciding to empower the workers was the right call. When the CASPC was formed and figured out its program, the coalition that was needed naturally came together and followed the demands and leadership that was set by the Schlage Lock workers themselves.

Another reason the Schlage Lock campaign was successful was because BWFJ did not avoid addressing the question of race. Instead, their commitment to addressing issues of race and racism head on, led to White Schlage Lock workers being challenged and transformed by Black leadership. A small percentage of the Schlage Lock worker population was White and when a White person went to CASPC meetings, their family and friends discouraged them from participating. The White workers "were told that it was a Black issue and that if anything came out of it, White workers would get theirs without having to wage a struggle." When the CASPC encouraged White workers to reach out to their churches and ask for the support of White clergy, their institutions refused to support them and their co-workers. At one point the White workers were feeling so much pressure that they asked BWFJ to change its name. The organization responded by saying that "Black workers and Black people should not have to make changes just to accommodate White chauvinism; and will not bend over backwards so that Whites wont have to try and overcome their hatred toward Black people. According to BWFJ, "this made white

workers stronger against the pressures they were getting."[375] An example of White workers being transformed on the race question is the story of Ms. Lula Radford. Radford volunteered at the Workers Center and would tell White workers who refused to come to the center to receive their benefits "we done fought and won this and you can't come down here and sign it so you can get extended benefits? What's wrong with you?" For Muhammad it showed how Lula was being transformed but also the social pressure that existed for those who try to challenge racist norms. Though challenging, the Schlage Lock struggle showed that Black and White workers could come together under Black workers' leadership. In sum, through struggle and not avoiding the question of race, the unification and coming together of Black and White workers is possible.

[375] *The Schlage Lock Struggle*, 5.

CONCLUSION: The Legacy and Impact of Black Workers for Justice

2022 was a year when Black Workers for Justice and its legacy was rightfully uplifted and celebrated throughout North Carolina and the South. In May of that year, BWFJ held its 37th Annual Martin Luther King Support for Labor Program. This annual program honoring Dr. King had a long tradition as being a fundraiser for the organization, but the program also served as a place where like-minded activists could come and fellowship, celebrate movement victories, and prepare for the battle ahead. In the past, BWFJ had keynote speakers such as Chokwe Lumumba (then Mayor of Jackson, Mississippi), Vicki Garvin, Arthur Kenoye, and Danny Glover, to name a few.[376] For the program in 2022, the theme was "40 Years of Black Workers for Justice: Positioning Ourselves for the Next 40 Years of Black Liberation and Workers Power." To embrace the rare occasion of a Black freedom organization being active for four decades, there was an intentional effort to acknowledge and celebrate BWFJ's past. We put together an eight minute video highlighting various aspects of BWFJ's history and had a visual display of framed banners. The framing of the banners represented not only preserving important history, it was a symbolic gesture that showed how much we valued the message on the banners.

[376] Cash Micheals, "Danny Glover Backs Workers," *The Carolinian*, April 11-14, 2002, 1-2. Glove drew a crowd of roughly 250 people. In his remarks, Glover called Black workers an endangered species. He connected the local struggle of workers to the struggles of workers struggling in different parts of the world. Glover also critiqued U.S. imperialism.

Figure 35: BWFJ members and their supporters at the 37th Annual Martin Luther King Support for Labor Program and Celebration on May 21, 2022.

Committed to using the past to guide the current struggle for social transformation, two keynote speakers stressed to the intergenerational crowd the urgency of now. One speaker was long-time scholar-activist and BWFJ supporter and close comrade Abdul Alkamilat, and the other speaker was Samira Addrey, a Cuban-trained doctor and leader in the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizations. Alkalimat challenged the new generation of BWFJ activist and stressed why a worker movement was foundational to today's movement. Samira, on the other hand, situated the COVID crisis in a political and anti-capitalist context. She also offered a vision of what a new, people-centered health care system could look like in the United States based on her experience in Cuba. In addition to the powerful remarks offered by the speakers, organizations from across the country submitted solidarity statements with BWFJ's past and present work. The Eastern region of the United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of

America submitted a statement asserting that BWFJ's "activism, militancy and dedication over many decades to a grassroots movement of the working class to raise the wages, working condition and consciousness have significantly contributed to lifting people out of poverty and more importantly teaching us all how to fight a fight and win power in a fight against forces beyond our comprehension"

Four months later, BWFJ was invited by the Southern Labor Studies Conference to organize a panel on "Black Workers for Justice at 40." The panel explored themes that have been a core part of BWFJ's work and was discussed by a BWFJ elder. That is, BWFJ was able to celebrate its 40 years by having its founding members and leaders tell the story. Some members focused their remarks on BWFJ's founding and its contributions to the Black liberation movement, while other focused their remarks on BWFJ building independent institutions, environmental justice, BWFJ's women's commission, internationalism, and its work in helping build and sustain UE-150, the North Carolina Public Service Workers Union. While the panel of BWFJ veterans was certainly a highlight and rich in content, a major part of the conference as it relates to BWFJ was comments made by historian Robin D.G. Kelley. The main event of the conference was a panel discussion on Bob Korstad's award winning book *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South*. In his remarks, Kelley praised the book's historical contribution, but he also proclaimed that BWFJ was following in the tradition and mirrored the work of Local 22. Kelley shouted out BWFJ's work and help frame their contributions as being in step with one of the most important worker struggles of the twenty-first century.

While 2022 offered a time to celebrate Black Workers for Justice, it was also a year of mourning. In late 2021, BWFJ lost one of its mentors Jim Grant and toward the end of 2022

BWFJ lost one of its founding members and longtime chairperson Saladin Muhammad. Though the organization was overwhelmed with sadness, the transition of these two important leaders brought to the surface invaluable stories, memories, and the legacy of Black Workers for Justice. When Muhammad joined the ancestors, his home-going service was emceed by Reuben Blackwell, a Rocky Mount City council member. Throughout the years, Blackwell admitted his high admiration and appreciation for Saladin Muhammad. He acknowledged that if it were not for the voting rights lawsuit that BWFJ was part of in 1983, his seat as an elected official would not have been possible. In Rocky Mount, BWFJ is seen as a leading organization for making monumental strides in trying to build Black political power in Rocky Mount.

Several months after Muhammad's celebration of life service, BWFJ sponsored a memorial service that took place at the Franklinton Center at Bricks. Here stories were shared about his political work in Philadelphia with RAM and the APP, but majority of the reflections were on his work in NC as a leader of BWFJ. Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, leader in North Carolina, NC NAACP, and now the Poor People's Campaign shared powerful remarks about Muhammad and the work he did throughout the state. Barber remembered Muhammad as refusing to compromise and being a principled fighter. Barber shared stories about meetings they were in together about fighting NC's right to work laws and Muhammad's leadership. On top of Barber's comments, UE-150 with over 20 members strong, marched in chanting and showing their appreciation for Muhammad and the role he played in helping build the union.

At the annual Martin Luther King program, the Southern Labor Studies conference, and the memorial services for Muhammad, it was clear that BWFJ had an impact on the younger generation and current leadership of the southern freedom movement. For the Dr. King program, younger activists from Atlanta drove six hours to honor and celebrate BWFJ. At the Southern

Labor Studies Conference, a generation of graduate students, lawyers, and activists from the 1980s credit BWFJ for their political development. For example, historian Will Jones mentioned BWFJ's work in the public section inspired his forthcoming book. The current president of the North Carolina American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organization (NC AFL-CIO) Mary B, credited the origins of her involvement in the labor movement, was also BWFJ's organizing in the public sector. When a national conference was organized in Durham North Carolina a few months after Saladin Muhammad's transition, time was dedicated to acknowledge his and BWFJ's legacy. People throughout the South shared stories about how members of BWFJ were mentors to them. One of the leaders in the Farmworkers Labor Organizing Committee (FLCO) based in North Carolina mentioned how BWFJ helped them build a rank-and-file organizing approach among farmworkers in North Carolina in the 1990s.

In addition to what has been included in this dissertation, BWFJ's legacy and work extends beyond the 1980s. In the 1990s, Black Workers for Justice called on international trade unions to organize the South, organized health clinics in rural communities, launched national campaigns to protect to rehire fired union workers, organized in response to the tragic Hamlet fire in 1991, participated in the Black radical congress, took workers to Cuba to learn from trade unions there, and made strides in organizing Black workers in the public sector. Simply put, this dissertation is only an introduction to the impact and legacy of BWFJ. More work is and needs to be done.

BWFJ's history is important and relevant to contemporary activists and movements for revolutionary change. Its history is indispensable for the current generation of activists for a range of reasons. The organization's labor organizing reveals the possibilities and practicality of achieving victories for workers in a right-to-work state. The mainstream labor movement has

often erroneously concluded that because of egregious anti-union laws and inhumane working conditions that successful labor organizing cannot be achieved in the South. Certainly, the anti-union culture of the South makes labor organizing much more difficult, but as the case with BWFJ, it does not make labor organizing impossible. As activist organizations in the twenty-first century are noticing the limitations of doing social justice work as a non-profit organization, BWFJ confirms that being a non-profit is not a requirement to do the work necessary for revolutionary change. BWFJ led historic struggles and operated for forty years without applying to be a nonprofit organization like other social justice organizations. BWFJ navigated the question of leadership development, organizational decision-making, and limited capacity without sacrificing its goals. Understanding BWFJ's organizing structure can be helpful for today.

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*In addition to consulting the archives at universities and community institutions across the state of North Carolina, a larger part of my archival work will be done in people's personal archives in their homes in North Carolina and throughout the country. In some cases, I will have to travel outside of the state to consult the archive of members who no longer live in NC, or who were part of building a BWFJ chapter outside of the state.

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*In addition to conducting dozens of interviews and having access to other interviews, I will have hundreds of VHS tapes, cassette tapes, and photos to draw on for my study from the personal collection mentioned above. These materials will be primary sources.

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