

## On Int'l Human Rights Day Workers in South Demand Collective Bargaining Rights, End to Racism *By Dante Strobino*

On Dec. 10, International Human Rights Day, public-sector workers in North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia—in a common struggle to deepen the protections under state law for collective-bargaining rights, and all organized by the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE)—held simultaneous news conferences announcing the most recent step in the International Worker Justice Campaign (IWJC).

They are requesting that the Inter-American Council on Human Rights, a body chartered under the Organization of American States, investigate why workers are denied the fundamental human rights to organize and collectively bargain labor contracts with their employers.

The workers in these three states all suffer from different conditions and laws but they all share the fact that none of these states protects their right to collectively bargain. North Carolina, the state with the worst laws and conditions, where public-employee collective bargaining is actually illegal, was the prime focus of this action.

For several years, UE along with Black Workers for Justice and other community and labor organizations have been building a grassroots movement to demand repeal of General Statute 95-98, the North Carolina law prohibiting collective bargaining for public workers.

North Carolina and Virginia are the only states in the country where collective bargaining for public workers is prohibited by law.

The UE's "request to the OAS is the third international legal initiative undertaken by our union in the fight to win collective bargaining rights for all public employees. Cases have also been brought before the human rights agency of the United Nations and, through the efforts of Mexico's FAT, [Authentic Workers' Front] under the side agreements to the North American Free Trade Agreement," states the UE website.

### Connecting workers' rights to the fight against racism

In the last three years, this campaign has organized hearings in several cities across North Carolina to speak out against work conditions. A highlight of that

campaign was in November 2005 when members of the United Nations International Labor Organization from several countries participated in a hearing where workers from all over the state testified about their working conditions and the need for collective bargaining.

Then, in September 2006, city workers in Raleigh were being forced to work overtime without pay, amidst other grievances, and waged a militant two-day walk out. It was not until the workers built their union and expanded their demands that they found any justice. This past November, they finally won a settlement from the city, awarding them back overtime pay.

Last February, the ILO released a 90-page report with its findings, indicting North Carolina for violating international law. On Feb. 10 more than 3,000 people, mostly African American, met and marched in the streets in the NAACP's "Historic Thousands on Jones Street People's Assembly" to demand collective bargaining for state workers along with a slate of 13 other demands for the North Carolina Legislature.

Due to the workers' mobilizations and power, this past legislative session saw unexpected progress on a bill created by the movement that would have eliminated the ban on collective bargaining.

The bill passed through one state house judiciary committee and is now sitting in the state appropriations committee. It has many supporters in the state legislature.

Given that most of the public-sector workers in North Carolina and Virginia are Black, Latin@ and women, this struggle for collective bargaining is an obviously monumental struggle against institutional racism and sexism. In fact, UE Local 150, the North Carolina Public Sector Workers Union, has always had the plight of oppressed workers foremost on its mind in fashioning an approach to this struggle.

Most recently, since the national upsurge in the anti-racist movement following the Jena 6 case in Louisiana, just as nooses were hung across the country meant to intimidate Black people, there were several nooses found hanging in



IWJC Organizer Ashaki Binta speaks at press conference about Collective Bargaining Rights at State Capital in Raleigh, NC

work places in North Carolina.

A Nov. 25 New York Times article, "The Geography of Hate," reported that 50 to 60 nooses have been found, with many others not reported.

This is not a struggle unfamiliar to UE Local 150. Back in 2004, during the IWJC public hearing in Rocky Mount, workers testified about how in the spring of 2004 a dummy was hung at a city work site, and linked this with other incidents of racism at that time.

In 2005, the UE supported several Black Department of Transportation workers, called the "DOT 7," who filed a lawsuit against the state after a noose was left hanging for a month over their work bench.

Most recently, since the Sept. 20 Jena march of tens of thousands, there have been nooses found at state work places at Eastern Carolina University and North Carolina State University, and two were found in a bucket with red paint, symbolizing blood, at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. UE-organized workers at all three of these universities have been fighting back.

Most recently, they held a news conference and rally at UNC-Charlotte to denounce the nooses. Statewide, UE Local 150 has also recently been implementing anti-racist union stewards' trainings for prompt, on-the-job organized resistance to racism.

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## Immokalee Workers step up battle against Burger King

*By Mike Martinez*

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), an organization that represents farmworkers in central Florida, on Dec. 23 extended their struggle to workers at the Burger King restaurant in the Miami neighborhood of Aventura by holding a picket there. On Nov. 30, the CIW had led a nine-mile-long march of 1,500 workers and their supporters down to the Burger King corporate offices in Miami demanding a penny more per pound raise for the tomatoes they pick.

The CIW has been waging fights against some of the largest U.S.-based fast food corporations. These farmworkers, who mostly pick tomatoes, are fighting to improve living and working conditions from what can only be called modern day slavery.

The first stop on the Nov. 30 march targeted Goldman Sachs, a large investment firm that owns a big portion of the BK Corporation's stock and has executives sitting on BK Corporation's board of directors. According to a Dec. 20, 2006, article in the New York Times, Lloyd C. Blankfein, chairman and chief executive of Goldman Sachs, was paid "a bonus of \$53.4 million in 2006, the highest ever for a Wall Street chief executive" — most of it coming off of the backs of farmworkers.

Most of the farmworkers receive 40-to-45 cents for each 32-pound bucket of tomatoes that they pick. After a 10-hour workday, they would have to have picked up to 2 tons each in order to make a little over \$50, barely making the minimum wage. These farmworkers have been working for the same rates since their last pay raise in 1978.

Paying the extra penny would only cost the multibillionaire fast-food giant \$250,000 a year, yet they refuse to budge.

In 2005, the CIW led a national boycott against another fast food giant, Taco Bell. Workers and students all over the country joined in solidarity in a campaign known as "boot the bell" that included hunger strikes. This struggle forced Taco Bell to the negotiating table.

McDonald's also came to the

negotiating table last April in the face of possible protests or a boycott. Despite all of these advancements and the Nov. 30 historic nine-mile march, the Burger King bosses vow to resist the penny raise and preserve the living conditions in Florida's fields.

But all is not grim, students and workers from several unions including the Teamsters, SEIU, CWA and UNITE HERE are joining the CIW in the fight to halt the decline in wages. The



struggle for a penny more will escalate and even Burger King restaurant employees are joining the fight. At the Dec. 23 picket at the local Burger King restaurant in mostly the white upscale Aventura neighborhood, restaurant workers cheered the picketers and **(continued on page 11)**

## Protest Demands: Overturn Lucasville 5 Conviction

*By Caleb T. Maupin*

The Ohio State Penitentiary (OSP) in Youngstown, Ohio, holds 539 people behind its brick walls, multiple barbed wire fences and iron bars. It is within this dungeon that four of the men known as the Lucasville Five are incarcerated: Bomani Shakur, Adbullah Hasan, Jason Robb and Namir Abdul Mateen. These men are held in a special section of OSP's death row, awaiting lethal injection for the crime of participating in a rebellion.

It has been nearly 15 years since the prisoners at Lucasville, in southern Ohio, rebelled and took control of the place in which they were imprisoned. The prisoners engaged in Lucasville rebelled against the brutality, the corruption and the degradation they endured on a daily basis.

In the insurrection that ensued groups like the Aryan Brotherhood, the Black Gangsta Disciples and Sunni Muslims put aside their differences and fought together. They became a "convict race," as a slogan the prisoner-rebels wrote upon the walls proclaimed.

The prisoners succeeded in negotiating a 21-point agreement that the warden was forced to sign. But afterwards, with a total lack of evidence, the government put five men on death row. They are held in tiny rooms smaller than a parking space for 23 hours a day, and then taken to a cage for the mandated one hour outside of their cells. When they have visitors, they are not permitted even to touch them, and can only see their loved ones through a

screen.

It is in this light that the Cleveland Lucasville Five Defense Committee, the Youngstown Prisoners Forum Group, Loved Ones of Prisoners, and CURE-Ohio have called for a demonstration right in front of the Ohio State Penitentiary in Youngstown, Ohio. The demonstration is called for Jan. 19, the weekend on which the life of Martin Luther King is celebrated.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. fought against racism and injustice all his life and was murdered by his racist enemies. This demonstration will be a continuation of his legacy. On Jan. 19, at 12:00, people will gather at the St. Augustine Episcopal Church. They will protest and raise their voices against injustices. Then, they plan to take a car caravan into the prison itself and deliver a letter of petition to the warden, demanding that the prisoners on death row have the ability to touch the ones they love that Ohio denies them during contact visits.

The organizers call on all who can to be there to demand justice. Free the Lucasville Five! Full Contact Rights for Death Row Prisoners! Overturn all the Lucasville Convictions! It is right to rebel, Free the Lucasville Five Now!

For location addresses, van reservations from Cleveland or other information, call (216) 481-6671 or email [pfcenter@sbcglobal.net](mailto:pfcenter@sbcglobal.net).

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