

The National Welfare Rights Union Stands in Support of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival

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Fifty years ago, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. turned to leaders of the welfare rights movement for guidance and support as he called together the Poor People's Campaign. Today, despite fifty years of struggle, the plight of the poor and dispossessed -- 70% women and children -- is undiminished and, indeed, more desperate. Surely this is not due to failure of care, commitment, energy or analysis on our part, rather we see fundamental changes in the landscape of the nation and beyond. Today we stand united with the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, not only to save and expand welfare and other survival programs, to demand pay equity, living wages for all workers including mothers and other caregivers, but to shift the economic priorities of the nation towards the caring of people and the planet and away from war—for the general welfare of all.

Fifty years ago, we fought for our rights to decent jobs and to welfare programs to ensure survival and dignity for our families. Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) helped us to have financial independence, provide care for our children, and refuse exploitative jobs. General assistance was available for poor people who were single. With the passage of "welfare reform" in 1996, millions of us were pushed into deeper poverty without the possibility of escape. Our right to welfare was taken away, workfare was federally imposed, and General Assistance was almost completely eliminated.

But we have always pushed back. In 1965 Johnnie Tillmon said " ...If I were President...I'd start paying women a living wage for doing the work we are already doing – child-raising and housekeeping..." – what today would be called caregiving. Coretta Scott King, as she encouraged support for Dr. King's call for a Poor People's Campaign, said that welfare cuts "forces mothers to leave their children and accept work or training, leaving their children to grow up in the streets." Welfare mothers took to the streets to oppose the Viet Nam war, which Dr. King called "an enemy of the poor" as it took lives and money like "some demonic destructive suction tube." In 1977 at the National Women's Conference in Houston, we won a resolution which included "... *And just as with other workers, homemakers receiving income transfer payments should be afforded the dignity of having that payment called a wage, not welfare.*" The power mustered by women opposed to workfare (recipients forced to work in exchange for a welfare grant) at that conference held off federal welfare "reform" for two decades.

Even as women of the world won a resolution in 1995. the at the United Nations World Conference on Women to count unwaged work in economic statistics, in the US welfare reform nevertheless dismissed the UN resolution and the vital caregiving work we do. Despite the fact that the caregiving work of mothers is valued per mother at a whopping \$143,000 a year (www.salary.com). Without the floor of welfare to build on, Congress was able to freeze the minimum wage for 11 years. Removal of children by child welfare services soared as money

went from mothers' hands to raise children to private agencies to take them away – children removed not because of abuse but because their mothers are poor.

Today--as has always been the case--most poor and homeless people are in jobs with low wages. Working even two and three jobs is often not enough to support families. Women, particularly women of color and immigrant women, lack pay equity. Even teachers in red states are rebelling against poverty wages. Cuts in SNAP (food stamps) leave millions without enough to eat. Workers, including mothers and caregivers, no longer have the right to survival programs and are criminalized for ways we have found to survive. Homelessness among women and children as well as veterans has increased. There are millions living on zero income because of federal and state mandated time limits.

What has become clear to us over the last fifty years is that the relationship between paid workers and the so-called “jobs creators” has changed. Increasingly, those jobs creator’s jobs are filled by robots, and electronically-based production which has eliminated more and more workers. We are left to fight for the fewer and fewer wages that are left. We are offered—and too often must accept—wages insufficient to feed and house ourselves and our families.

We are manipulated to turn against each other in the fight for survival - the weapon of choice used against us is divide and conquer. Racism, sexism, anti-immigrant sentiment and policies, homophobia, regionalism, are used to cleave our class to divide us one from the other. Poor people are regarded as “other,” and not the workers that we are. Similarly, our organizations are funneled into a divide and conquer scheme, set against each other as funding and labels of “legitimacy” are distributed to those who will conform and labor in their assigned silos.

What is clear to us today is that we are one class with one cause—workers waged and unwaged, documented and undocumented, who collectively have the need and the right to the basic means of survival.

Today, the very tools of production, that have eliminated jobs depressed wages and created a new class of permanently unemployed can also give us a world of abundance to solve the problems of poverty and escalating dispossession. Those who face these are the key architects for the revolutionary reconstruction of values and society for which Dr. King called. It is imperative that we bring the people a vision of the new society that is possible today. Together we must broaden the fight for our basic needs by uniting and advancing the cause of our class. For all these reasons, we stand united with the new Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. We are multiracial, intergenerational, and united as the many against the dictatorship of the rich, to defeat the four pillars of evil: racism, poverty, the war economy and destruction of the environment. We stand for welfare with dignity, and the protection of our planet and all who live on it.

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