

Working for Respect

By Dr. Andre M. Perry, Contributing Columnist
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There is a practical imperative for New Orleans to become a roll your sleeves up type of town instead of a let your hair down type of vacation site. The Big Easy must transform itself into the Grind if the city is to recover at an encouraging rate. City and state officials certainly acknowledge the value of hard work in their rhetoric around the rebuilding of New Orleans. However, will they push employers to respect blue collar labor enough to give hotel, construction, and hospital workers the financial ability to send their children to Tulane, Xavier, or UNO?

Now that the bonuses at Burger King are gone, how will many of our residents who were not fortunate enough to attend college afford the rocket fueled rises in housing, energy, and educational costs? We certainly need hotel workers for our tourism industry, but we also need those same workers to claim their share in the housing market if we want safer and more responsible communities. A vast percentage of our hotel and hospital workers simply do not make enough money to invest in a better New Orleans.

Work should give people the opportunity to acquire the type of human capital goods that encourage health, wealth and happiness. Work should provide access to health care, good learning environments, affordable housing, and safety. Employers don't offer their services to make their employees rich. The costs of provisions given to workers affect bottom lines and profit margins. Employers need incentives (profits) to stay in business. However, if workers depend on jobs merely for base level survival, then employers and landlords will have too much influence on how laborers live outside of work. Moreover, workers will spiral downward in the morass of dependency.

The oil crisis of the late 1970s marked the end of an era when blue collar labor could leverage salaries and benefits that could propel folks who barely held a high school diploma into the middle class. A blue collar worker in the seventies possessed a greater ability to choose the neighborhood he or she (typically he) wanted to reside than a worker in 2006. Labor unions primarily in the Northeast and Midwest mobilized workers to force industry to respect the sweat of coal miners as well as steel and factory workers.

Many of the people propping up our fragile city work in hotels and casinos. They are garbage men, roofers, janitors, plumbers, and electricians. It's primetime that employers and elected officials showed their respect by increasing the living wage for the people who can literally hammer out the national perceptions of Bourbon Street, The Superdome, violence, and unsavory political practices of elected officials. These negative perceptions along with insurance costs and hurricanes make prospective companies reluctant to call New Orleans their home.

Unfortunately, industry does not readily share power, money, or credibility for the

greater good of any city. Employers in particular have grown accustomed to the type of profit margins that weigh down workers' pay scale and benefits. Power in the form of higher pay and better working conditions has to be negotiated and bargained for. This requires workers to realize the power they possess.

Because the union movement primarily did not reach the South and because of the declining influence of unions in general, New Orleans' assortment of service workers' voices do not have a singular megaphone or forum to air their concerns. In addition, service workers need heightened centralized spaces to receive information that empowers them. Most importantly, the hotel and hospital workers as well as those laborers who are subject to unscrupulous contractors need advocates.

Three weeks ago the Interfaith Worker Justice national organization hired Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou to serve as the executive director of the Interfaith Worker Justice Center of New Orleans. The IWJ-New Orleans aims to ensure a just rebuilding of New Orleans and help improve the working conditions of the city along with the faith communities and organized labor movement. Rev. Sekou and the Center seek to "train people to participate in the economy, support those who desire to form unions, and achieve a living wage."

To reach these aims, Rev. Sekou plans to do considerable grassroots organizing and training. Again, the lack of a major advocate or union created an environment in which workers are not familiar with their rights or abilities to improve their working conditions. Rev. Sekou will join the conversation and labor movement with community groups already on the ground. Sekou is already reaching out to community leaders within trailer parks, schools, and of course the faith community.

Rev. Sekou is the founding national coordinator for Clergy and Laity Concerned about Iraq (CALC-I). CALC-I represents over 300 faith based institution and organization around the country working to end the war and occupation in Iraq. Rev. Sekou is the former co-coordinator of the Democracy Action Project (DAP) housed at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C. In the aftermath of the 2000 Elections, Democracy Summer (now DAP) trained a multi-racial group of over 100 youth activists from around the country in Tallahassee, FL. He served on platform committee for the National Political Hip Hop Convention.

Sekou led the effort to organize 18-24 year olds and served as Senior Advisor on urban public policy for the Kucinich for President 2004 Campaign. Rev. Sekou directed a community center in the notorious Cochran Housing Project in St. Louis, MO and worked with at risk youth.

Sekou certainly has the pedigree, but when asked, what prepared you for the new position, Rev. Sekou did not rattle a list of past positions, which are indeed significant. Instead, Sekou offered an ethic grounded in a tradition. Sekou said, "My preparation comes out of a willingness to make a commitment to stand in a particular tradition that comes out of the biblical narrative that we call the prophetic tradition - that god gives a

preferential option to the poor, that God is deeply concerned about those who are in misery - and this is a way that I live out my faith. So part of that preparation has to do with a certain kind of faith commitment that is not about personal piety, but it is about social justice."

Let's welcome Rev. Sekou and his efforts to help workers find and apply the power that can bring justice and fair wages to blue collar labor. Rev. Sekou can be reached by phone at 504.309.1776 or by email at osekou@iwj.org.

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