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Welfare Rights conference in New Orleans: ‘Imagine a world where no one goes without food or affordable housing’

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National Welfare Rights Organization, 1968.

During the first week of August, the National Welfare Rights Union (NWRU) convened in New Orleans. The meeting brought together activists from around the country to study both history and current conditions, as well as to reaffirm their commitment to struggle.

This was a good time for a national meeting on welfare rights, given the extreme situation faced by millions of working-class people in the United States. For many,

life has been made bleak by decades of low wages and austerity. The COVID-19 crisis is making things even worse. The country's largest hunger-relief non-profit, Feeding America, reports that some 50 million people were food insecure during the pandemic. On the eve of this conference, 11 million families were facing eviction or foreclosure. Biden only acted to extend the eviction moratorium after facing popular pushback.

In an address at the onset of the pandemic, NWRU President, Maureen Taylor, spoke of the difficulties caused by the cruelty of this system, but she also stressed the need to envision an alternative. Taylor said: "Working people-can't we imagine a world where universal healthcare is a right and cannot be tied to a job that may disappear? Working people-can't we imagine a world where preparation for pandemics are already in place because the next one is anticipated? Working people-can't we imagine a world where no one goes without food or affordable housing under any circumstances?"

The NWRU was established in 1987, growing out of the work of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). The NWRO was a key part of the Poor People's Campaign organized by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. That movement terrified the capitalists. One organizer at this week's conference said, "The threat of Martin Luther King was that he was uniting the working-class." Indeed, when King was murdered in 1968, the militancy of the Black liberation struggle was spilling over to all groups fighting for their rights in this society.

The organizers with today's NWRU are carrying on the radical traditions of the NWRO founders, like George Wiley and Johnnie Tillmon, two giants of the civil rights era. In this week's discussion, conference-attendees stressed the need of getting back to basics, that is, to struggle led by poor, working-class people, not beholden to granting organizations and professional politicians. Elders shared radical history with the younger activists, while affirming the immense potential of today's youth, as

demonstrated by the 2020 rebellions against white supremacist police terror.

A lively conversation took place about the necessity of basing struggle on revolutionary education and an analysis of changing conditions.

Rev. Annie Chambers of the NWRU, Socialist Unity Party, and other organizations, summed up much of this discussion in the following way: “Facing different conditions today, what else can we do but have revolution? Young people are fighting. But we’ve got to give it direction, to call what we’re in a revolution to change this whole system. Piecemeal change isn’t enough. This whole capitalist system must fall.”

