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Unemployed Workers Union and workers' power in the pandemic crisis

written by Struggle - La Lucha
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On July 6, the Unemployed Workers Union (UWU) picketed the Maryland Labor Department office in Baltimore.

Struggle-La Lucha questioned Sharon Black, an organizer with the Unemployed Workers Union in Baltimore. Following are her answers.

How did the Unemployed Workers Union get started?

You could say the initial effort began at the United Workers Assembly on May 1, 2021. While the Amazon workers' struggle was highlighted, Steven Ceci, an unemployed hospitality worker, spoke on his struggle to get benefits and invited people to connect around organizing the unemployed.

In the beginning it was primarily unemployed workers from the People's Power Assembly who called several protests at the unemployment office in Baltimore. The group was small, but as the crisis grew, it became apparent that we needed a union of the unemployed, underpaid and ultimately low-wage workers also.

Not just a committee but an actual union. At this point the UWU stands on its own as an organization. I'm sure that some people initially thought we'd lost our minds.

We organized weekly "Unemployed & Workers Rights Clinics." Because of COVID-19, we set up tables outside our office. On our first day, workers had shown up before we could even set up. People filled out grievances and we mailed them to the Labor Department Secretary and to the governor.

In the midst of what was already a major crisis, Gov. Larry Hogan announced that he was halting the federal pandemic payments early.

What about your lawsuit, how did that start?

The UWU lawsuit was one of the earliest lawsuits nationally. We did it as an organizing tool. Workers needed something that could buoy them.

In the beginning, we were alone. I don't want to go into all of the backstory, but we were told that it was impossible, and at the start, we filed the lawsuit without any support either financially or politically.

As organizers, we never saw the courts as the be-all and end-all. With thousands of unemployed workers spread across the state (sometimes isolated), the lawsuit garnered a lot of attention for our campaign, helping to push the struggle forward.

What stage is the struggle in for the Unemployed Workers Union now?

We're overwhelmed. Our phones never stop ringing and we can't keep up. Building

an ark in a storm is difficult and it takes some ability to see the bigger picture to keep going. We could easily become impatient with ourselves and the things we're lacking.

We won this incredible victory in stopping the governor from halting the weekly pandemic benefits early. Over 300,000 workers will continue with the CARES Act money. Governor Hogan tweeted that he would never change his mind but he was forced to back down.

But there has been no rest or even a chance to allow this victory to sink in because over 20,000 unemployed workers still have not received their benefits because of a designed-to-fail unemployment system.

The second phase of this struggle, both in terms of the lawsuit and in the street, is in full swing. The challenge is getting people more deeply involved and to see that power comes from collective action. At our last Workers Assembly we talked about the George Floyd case and what it took to get Derek Chauvin convicted.

What is your general perspective around unemployment and the UWU?

Our goal is to organize a union of unemployed and low-wage workers. There is no rule that you have to have dues, or a paid staff. Not because we are opposed to either, but it doesn't suit our present situation. We define our union based on the slogan "an injury to one, is an injury to all."

The UWU might even look toward getting membership in the AFL-CIO. It's an interesting question that could challenge the narrow conception of what it means to be a worker.

We see the union as part of the broader workers' struggle. There's a connection between unemployment and low-wage and unorganized workers.

Part of the initial attack, the propaganda about workers not wanting to work, getting too much in pandemic benefits — was aimed at dividing workers. It was a lie that served to make the unemployed feel isolated and bad, but its real aim was to lower wages for everyone.

There's been a major displacement of workers, one that I believe will be long-term. Some of this is obvious in terms of hospitality workers and in other areas of work. Certainly many smaller businesses have been wiped out. But how work is done, the way that technology for profit is utilized, is again reshaping and intensifying exploitation.

It has also been a period of resistance to what you could call a war against workers. The efforts of the Amazon workers in Bessemer, Alabama, to unionize — which is far from over — is one example as are countless smaller but inspiring strikes.

But the defining struggle that has shaped this past year has been the Black Lives Matter movement; even the New York Times was forced to document its incredible breadth. This struggle against racism is a workers' struggle and has helped to shape what is taking place at almost every workplace.

What is your long-term political perspective?

Unemployment is a permanent feature of capitalism. There's never been full employment, at least in the United States, regardless of what cycle capitalism is in. Karl Marx explained it best: capitalists rely on a "surplus" of workers to keep workers competing with one another; this keeps wages and benefits low to extract maximum value from labor, increasing profits.

There's also the cyclical aspect of capitalism, the boom and bust of overproduction where the economy contracts. Massive unemployment is one of the main features.

This is important because it shows that organizing the unemployed is critical and

will remain so in the future.

What are some of the issues pertinent to unemployed workers?

The unemployment benefit system is broken and in crisis, if you even want to call it compensation. There's no uniform system, rather it varies vastly in different states. In Mississippi, the highest benefits are \$235 a week. You also have states like Alabama, Florida and North Carolina that have horrifically short periods of assistance, from 12 to 14 weeks.

The false excuse is that the cost of living varies in different areas, but the real driving force is the lack of a strong labor movement and the history of "Jim Crow" racism and segregation, the latter being historically most important.

Even before the pandemic, most workers would tell you they had to jump through hoops, that they were lucky to even collect benefits.

When I mention the "war on workers," one of the factors silently driving this present crisis has been the attack on public-sector workers.

Before and during the pandemic, state governments were automating the system and getting rid of the workers who service benefits. Certainly, the installation of the Beacon system has been a major feature of the crisis in Maryland.

There is a major probability that unemployment insurance reserves will be depleted if another major wave in the pandemic hits or another capitalist downturn takes place. Unemployment insurance is under-funded.

We saw this in September 2020, when states had to apply for federal loans. California, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York and Texas borrowed billions. The U.S. Treasury Department had listed 20 states that had applied for loans.

In addition, unemployment insurance is not adequate. It doesn't solve people's needs, including protection from eviction, foreclosures, repossessions and providing all of the other necessities.

This raises a number of questions.

The pandemic has proved that the money is there. The billionaires and trillionaires have made record profits, the pandemic being a bonanza for them. They're awash in money, including uncirculated capital moldering in banks. The bloated Pentagon death machine hasn't lost a dime from their \$700+ billion budget.

Every human being can and should be guaranteed an income. Dr. King's demand for a national guaranteed "Jobs or income now" — something that he advanced during the Poor People's Campaign — has to be raised with more vigor.

The magnitude of the crisis that is actually unfolding now — something that will ripen more — calls for different solutions and organization. Ideas that might have been considered pie-in-the-sky, are necessities. Like a shorter work week. A reorganization of work itself.

Questions about capitalism as a mode of production — is the system viable under these conditions? The fact that capitalism creates the crisis, but cannot solve it, raises the issue of socialism.

Is there anything else you wanted to add?

Getting back to the nitty-gritty. What has been so rewarding about the UWU is watching workers develop solidarity, consciousness and bringing workers together who have never been in struggle. Workers who never thought that they would be betrayed by the system have found themselves abruptly and cruelly left to fend for themselves.

Organizing the UWU is part of the antidote, not the only one, to the Jan. 6 coup attempt by a band of neo-Nazi and racist extremists. Of course, it was not workers who for the most part led that attempt. It was wealthy business owners, large and small, and especially those from inside the state, i.e. the Pentagon, military, and police, that conspired. But they depend on white workers, especially those who have bought into racism, or who are neglected and confused, to stay on the sidelines or in some cases act as cannon fodder.

The UWU has been a force to unite, organize workers in their own self-interest and pull people away from that kind of answer.

