



Struggle-La-Lucha.org

Mobilizing in our own name

written by Lallan Schoenstein
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An interview with author and labor activist Clarence Thomas



Million Worker March Movement contingent at the New Orleans 'Justice after Hurricane Katrina' march in December 2005. Author Clarence Thomas is on the right end of the banner.

This season is being called #Striketober. Workers are showing their power by striking, and demanding better conditions. The release of the anthology, "Mobilizing in Our Own Name: Million Worker March" is timely.

Author Clarence Thomas — an African American labor activist, longshore leader, and an organizer of the 2004 Million Worker March — has been speaking at meetings and gatherings around the country. We talked with Thomas on Oct.17, the

anniversary of the Million Worker March in Washington, to get his insights on the labor struggle today.

Struggle-La Lucha: Welcome to Striketober. Tell us about your new book.

Clarence Thomas: Thank you for the opportunity to have this conversation. I have been a member of International Longshore and Warehouse Workers (ILWU) Local 10 for 31 years. Though retired from the waterfront, I'm still in the struggle. After I finished the book, I first reached out to the ILWU Local 10 members. I introduced the book at the Local 10 commemoration of Juneteenth and at a Labor Fest program on July 10 where I did a book signing and reading for union members and the community.

There are Local 10 members that are featured in "Mobilizing in Our Own Name." For many, it was their first opportunity to meet an author who wrote a book about them and their union. Of course, they're very enthusiastic about the book.

Since then, most of my interactions have been through Zoom. In the past several weeks, I've begun to travel to events. I attended and sold books at the Teamsters Women's Leadership Conference that took place in Las Vegas, Nevada. We met with workers from across the country: Louisville, Kentucky; Houston, Texas; Seattle, Washington; New York City; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and from Phoenix, Arizona. It was the first time that we had a chance to meet workers in one location from various parts of the country.

The Teamsters National Black Caucus (TNBC) invited us to the women's conference. They played a very important role in organizing the 2004 Million Worker March. Brother Chris Silvera who is the longest serving principal officer in the Teamsters, heads up Teamsters Local 808 in Long Island City, New York. Local 808 members are responsible for maintaining the track at Metro-North. Chris Silvera was the East Coast coordinator of the Million Worker March (MWM) along with sister Brenda

Stokely from AFSCME DC 1707.

International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) General President, James P. Hoffa, wrote a letter praising the book and discussed its importance in terms of building labor solidarity. He expressed that the concerns of workers addressed at the Million Worker March (MWM) in 2004, are even more relevant today. Hoffa's support for the book, which features the Teamsters, is one of the reasons why we are able to reach out to IBT members all over the country.

Struggle-La Lucha: The book's title — Mobilizing in Our Own Name — tell us more.

Clarence Thomas: Oct. 17, 2021, is the 17th anniversary of the 2004 Million Work March Mobilization in Washington D.C. on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The name of the MWM book, "Mobilizing in Our Own Name," is based on the premise that workers cannot depend on bourgeois politicians to address the issues of systemic racism, income inequality, corporate greed, workers' rights, universal health care, slashing the military budget, ending the murder of African Americans and other people of color. Today, the contradictions that are precipitated by the crisis of capitalism are greater than they were in 2004.

The MWM anthology is about radical African American trade unionists in one of the most renowned radical labor organizations of the world, the ILWU Local 10. They defied the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO, to mobilize the Million Worker March.

As we relate the story of MWM, organized 17 years ago, to what's happening today, it is prophetic. Workers, for too long, have been put into a straitjacket as it relates to their being able to address their needs, because of their respective labor organizations are subordinated to the Democratic Party.

Struggle-La Lucha: Yes. Now there is a strikewave across the country

Clarence Thomas: This October, some 100,000 workers from across the country are withholding their labor at the point of production. No one can speak for workers like workers can speak for themselves. These actions involve workers that are organized, such as the UAW, California nurses, Kellogg's, Nabisco and John Deere. What we're witnessing is not limited to the traditional sectors of industry. Workers are coming out of the global pandemic, which highlighted the income and wealth inequality in this country.

The corporate media and economists measure the success of the economy by the number of jobs that are generated, while ignoring the quality of those jobs. What the corporate sector frames as a labor shortage is more accurately described as a living-wage shortage. It is a pay shortage, a child care shortage, a paid sick-leave shortage, a health care shortage.

In an interview, an African American woman in Battle Creek, Michigan, reportedly said that at Kellogg's, a global company, "while we prepare food for the world, we're unable to take off from work to feed our children." Kellogg's workers are being told just minutes before the end of their shift that they have to work more hours. This harkens back to the days before we had unions. This is a reflection of the capitalist crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 epidemic.

In California where I live, a multibillionaire, a right-wing, racist capitalist who owns the Oakland A's, the Gap and other enterprises, wants to build a baseball stadium, a condominium, a hotel, as well as retail and commercial space at the third busiest port on the West Coast. This is an example of the neoliberal model of capitalism, which is a policy that makes it easier for corporations, banks and the rich to exploit the working class. This gentrification will compromise the Port of Oakland and the jobs of essential workers.

Struggle-La Lucha: The ILWU has a history of class struggle, of knowing the power of a strike.

Clarence Thomas: Henry Bridges, one of the founders of the ILWU, said during contract negotiations that the only reason why the employers were at the bargaining table was because they knew that if they did not collectively bargain with us, we were going to shut them down. They would not be able to make any profits.

That was over 80 years ago. Nothing has changed. Workers feel like they're working harder. They also feel that they have put their lives on the line during this pandemic, that they have not been protected. And that after all that they have been through, they have realized that they have to stand up and fight back.

This isn't some kind of an official country-wide strike effort. As a matter of fact, it's been called an unofficial General Strike. This is not something that has been called for by the leadership of the AFL-CIO whose agenda is not consistent with the needs of the rank-and-file. We, in labor, are not the junior partners of the Democratic Party.

Struggle-La Lucha: Is this what you call organizing in our own name?

Clarence Thomas: Yes! Workers must have their own agenda. They do not want to have endless wars, to live in a country where there are no living wages. Workers want to have universal health care that is not dependent on the health care policies with their jobs. Because even when workers are unemployed, they are still workers. Workers want to be able to form a union, to send their children to college, to purchase a home. Workers do not need to be fired at the whim of a boss. They want to live in a country where there's clean water and air, and not have to deal with the impact of global warming caused by corporate greed.

The corporate media, which is very, very powerful in this country, can form attitudes that lead workers to behave against their own interest. When I viewed the striking white workers at the Battle Creek, Michigan, plant, I could not help but to think how many of them have been caught up in the issue of wearing a mask versus not

wearing a mask.

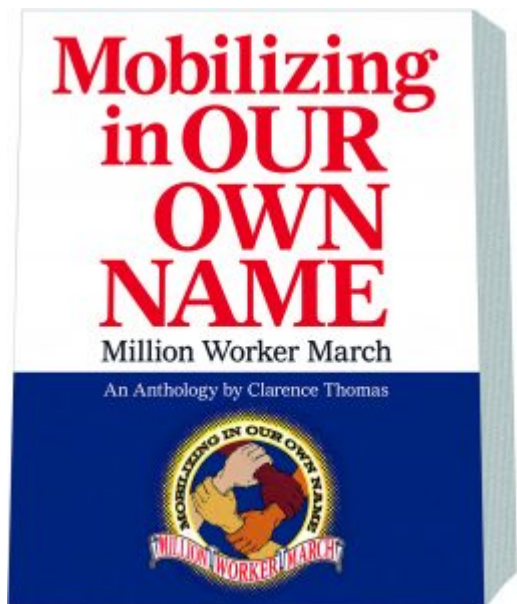
I am bringing that up, because we need to understand how white supremacy impacts many of our sisters and brothers in the labor movement. When we look at the labor movement today, it is a rarity to find an African American who heads up an International Union.

One case that I know of is Willie Adams, who is the president of the ILWU. Adams recently met with President Biden to talk about the bottleneck of the international supply chain that is impacting workers who are being forced to work 24/7 to be able to move much needed merchandise and cargo across the country.

White supremacy has negatively impacted one of the most important parts of trade unionism, and that is worker solidarity. Today's strikes that we're witnessing across the country is a very, very positive development. Workers are taking action based upon their own concerns and needs.

There has been a great deal of anti-worker propaganda. We find that many in the white working class thought that Donald Trump was going to do something for them. Well, they found out that he did not. Trump was more committed to making sure that whites are more concerned about being white than having living wages and a pension. These strikes are a blow to white supremacy because they are building multi-racial class solidarity.

"Mobilizing in Our Own Name," the MWM anthology is a prophetic book. It's very important for workers to get the book in their hands.



www.MillionWorkerMarch.com

“Mobilizing in Our Own Name” documents struggles in news articles, interviews, letters, posters, photos, speeches and video transcripts.

Danny Glover who was a part of the MWM, wrote, “Those of us that are activists in the struggle and are contemporaries of my brother and comrade Clarence ‘Buzz’ Thomas, whom I’ve known since our days at San Francisco State, he has done what many of us have talked about but refused to do; write a book! This anthology captures the Million Worker March and so many subsequent struggles that really underscores how ILWU Local 10 continues its long radical history and tradition of struggle. To quote sister Angela Davis, when we both spoke at the Juneteenth 2020 rally at the Port of Oakland, “Whenever the ILWU takes a stand, the world feels the reverberation.”

Mobilizing in Our Own Name will be inspiring and instructive to workers and activists in the future. For those of us that were part of the struggles and actions covered in this book, we realize this is “our” anthology.

