

Seattle longshore worker on the meaning of Juneteenth

written by Alia Lighter
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The morning of June 19, 2023, Local 19 led a Stop Work action in honor of Juneteenth. June 19, 1865, the calvary rolled into Galveston, Texas, and freed those slaves after 2 1/2 years of the employer refusing to abide by the Emancipation Proclamation. This is a day long celebrated by African Americans, but only recently

became a federal holiday and popular to celebrate in the mainstream. Local 19 has had an action every year since 2020.

Video:

https://www.instagram.com/tv/CtsABS6K_He/?igshid=MTc4MmM1YmI2Ng%3D%3D

The march left the Local 19 hall at 10 a.m., 120 strong, a dozen of which were children. Various unions and organizations brought their banners to follow behind ILWU Local 19's: OWLs, Transit Union Local 587, and UAW 4121. Various others brought their signs and swag, including the IBU, Freedom Socialist Party, Reproductive Justice, UFCW 3000, UFCW 21, and NW Carpenters Union. We walked about 1.4 miles while chanting, "Jeff Berry, say his name, Anthony Lemon, say his name, Ronnie Thomas, say his name! PMA say their names!" These are the names of three Black men from Local 19 that died from COVID during the pandemic. We worked valiantly through the pandemic and took heavy losses. We will not forget.

After marching for about 40 minutes, participants were greeted with the sounds of C.T. Thompson and the Classic Soul Band crooning "A Change is Gonna Come," along with water and refreshments. Those already at the rally bumped the number of participants up to about 200. After two more songs from the band, the 2-hour program began, which would include 16 speakers with song breaks in between.

Speakers climbed handcrafted stairs onto a secure flat rack with a banner below that read in big orange letters, "ALL WORKERS WIN WHEN SLAVERY ENDS." Ricky Reyes spoke from WA NA WARI, an organization that promotes Black ownership of the preservation of their culture. Ricky said, "When we look at all the people who do this work a lot of the time none of them really look like us. They don't come from our own communities ... we want to look at how Black folks can take history keeping into our own hands and collect stories about us for us and archive them in our own communities." I include this quote because there I was, sitting in

the front row being reminded of my whiteness as a lead organizer of this Juneteenth event. I think we need to constantly remind ourselves, those of us that are white, to uplift Black folks and people of color, let them lead, and continue to educate ourselves.

The Black Prisoners Caucus, formed over 50 years ago inside Washington State prisons, spoke, “They created the 13th amendment, which supposedly freed people, but they slid in that clause that allowed prisoners to work for free. Does anyone know how much a prisoner makes in Washington state? \$0.30/hr. After six months, you get a raise. You know how much the raise is? \$0.06 ... and you top out at \$0.42” They requested help from the labor movement. Incarcerated people making pennies an hour is a labor issue.

A professor from the University of Washington Department of Labor Studies Moon-Ho Jung said, “Every fall I ask my students at UW this question: Who was the most responsible for the abolition of slavery? Usually more than half write down the answer that we are taught to believe and that answer is Abraham Lincoln. He supposedly freed the slaves by signing the Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, 1863. The answer that generations of American historians have tried to ignore and dismiss is — the people most responsible for the abolition of slavery were the enslaved Black people themselves.” He called it one of the greatest slave rebellions in world history and quoted W. E. B. Du Bois, who said it was the general strike of a half million Black workers.

Thanks to the different unions and organizations who showed up for this event. Along with all the wonderful speakers and the band. To be successful in our labor movement, we need to incorporate community and other organizations in addition to other unions. The Juneteenth Committee to Stop Police Terror and End Systemic Racism is longshoreman-led but comprised of different unions and organizations, and that is what made this event possible. Thanks to our committee members and

chair, Gabriel Prawl – Vice President of Local 52, who has been an invaluable resource to me personally and who has taught me what a good leader is. He is extremely well qualified and has a decades-long record of passion and experience in the labor movement. These Juneteenth events would not be possible without a leader of his caliber. The full video of the march and rally can be found on our Instagram @stop policeterrorseattle

Alia Lighter, from ILWU Local 19, is a member of the Seattle Juneteenth Committee to Stop Police Terror and End Systemic Racism organizing committee.



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