

# Never forget the Hamlet fire: Capitalist greed killed 25 workers

written by Struggle - La Lucha

September 8, 2021

**The News & Observer**

Raleigh, N.C. Wednesday, September 4, 1991 \$0.40

## 'Let me out!' victims scream

### Fire at Hamlet chicken-processing plant kills 25



49 injured as doors bar safety routes

By JULIE POWERS RIVES and TOM MATHER  
Staff Writers

**HAMLET** — Trapped workers pressed on blocked doors and fled into fireways to escape flames that roared through a Richmond County chicken processing plant Tuesday, killing at least 25 and injuring 49 others.

A processing area of Imperial Food Products was turned into an inferno when giant grease-filled vats fuelled by natural gas were ignited when a hydraulic line ruptured. The result was the worst workplace tragedy since state records began in 1970.

Most of the dead — about three-fourths of them women — died of smoke inhalation rather than of burns, said Fred D. McQuire of Hamlet, the first doctor at the fire scene.

Many victims were found near doorways, where they tried unsuccessfully to escape the flames and smoke.

Sam L. Broadnax, who was walking past the plant when he saw the fire, said he had heard trapped

**Hamlet and Richmond County**

	Hamlet	Richmond County
1990 population	6,136	94,016
Unemployment rate July 1991	9.1%	10.2%
1990 per capita income	\$13,274	\$11,860
N.C. average	\$13,287	\$10,500

**Major Industries**

Industry	Employees
Fruit of the Loom	1,000
Richmond Axle	1,200
Santa Lina Hospital	1,200
U.S. Paper Products, Inc.	900
Waddington Industries	900
Proctor & Gamble	900

■ Resources, hospitals, contact quickly, page 4A.  
■ Group that plant used to like

Twenty-five workers were killed on Sept. 3, 1991, when a fire broke out at the Imperial Foods chicken plant in Hamlet, N.C. Workers choked to death from heavy black smoke after a deep-fat fryer ignited. Eighteen of the dead were women.

Another 54 workers were injured. Forty-nine children were orphaned.

Disability benefits for survivors were pitiful. The payments were just two-thirds of their average pay, which was around \$5 per hour.

None of the workers had to die. The processing plant had neither an operating sprinkler system nor an evacuation plan.

Bodies were found next to doors with footprints from workers trying to escape. The [doors were ordered locked](#) by the plant's owner, Emmett J. Rowe.

The chicken nugget capitalist did so because he thought workers, many of whom were Black, would steal chickens. White and Black workers died together because of Rowe's racism.

In its 11 years of operation, the plant never had a safety inspection. Rowe didn't even register the plant with the state.

Even if he had, the workers might not have seen an inspector. Like half the states, North Carolina is allowed by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to run its own inspection program. North Carolina has 10.5 million people but less than a hundred safety inspectors.

OSHA isn't any better staffed. It currently has [just 1,850 inspectors](#) in the United States. That's one inspector for every 82,513 employed workers.

Defunding trigger-happy, club-swinging, chokehold-using police is denounced by both Trump and Biden. OSHA has been defunded since the day it was established 50 years ago.

Yet dead chickens at the Hamlet plant were inspected every day by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. One USDA inspector even approved locking a door — a

violation of federal and state laws — to supposedly keep out flies.

Nobody wants filthy food, but shouldn't human lives be given as much consideration as chicken parts? Despite a 1994 agreement to report dangerous conditions to OSHA, there's no record that the USDA has ever done so, [according to "The Assembly"](#) digital magazine.

### **Rich man's justice**

It was only because of a community mobilization that Rowe was given any jail time at all. Playing key roles were the Black Workers for Justice in North Carolina and Brenda Stokely, former president of AFSCME Local 1707 in New York City.

Serial murderer Rowe was sentenced to 19 years, 11 months in prison. He served almost four years. That's less than two months for every worker he murdered.

Compare that to Alvin Kinnard's sentence. Before being released in 2019, the Black man spent nearly [36 years in Alabama prisons](#) for allegedly robbing \$50 from a bakery.

Emmett Rowe began his criminal career up North. He opened Imperial Foods in Moosic, Pa. — near Scranton — in 1973.

The plant had two fires, injuring several workers, including one critically. It was sued for polluting water.

Just as northern textile mills went south in the 1920s so the companies could pay lower wages, so did Emmett Rowe.

Besides his Hamlet factory, Rowe bought the Haverpride Foods plant in Tarrant, Ala., in 1988. He closed it in 1990 without giving the employees 60 days notice, as required by federal law.

More than \$250,000 in severance pay was ordered to be paid to 115 workers by a federal judge. [Rowe never paid a penny](#).

Rowe's co-conspirators in these crimes were the fast-food outfits that bought his chicken fillets and nuggets. They rip off millions of workers, and not just at their drive-throughs.

[Wendy's CEO Todd Penegor](#) is pulling in \$7,213,774 this year. Meanwhile the farmworkers who pick the tomatoes for Wendy's hamburgers are [ill-treated and miserably paid](#).

### **Job cuts kill**

Hamlet was an important junction on the old Seaboard Air Line railroad, now part of the CSX system. (The term "air line" referred to the railroad's claim of a straight route.) Two Amtrak trains a day stop there.

Trains coming south from Virginia could go to four different directions from Seaboard's Hamlet hub. These included lines to Florida, Alabama and Georgia.

The line to Atlanta and Birmingham went through Monroe, N.C., where Mabel and Robert Williams organized armed self-defense against the Ku Klux Klan. They faced phony kidnapping charges but were able to escape to the socialist countries of Cuba and the People's Republic of China.

Last year hundreds of workers tested positive for the coronavirus at [Tyson's poultry plant](#) in Monroe. At least one worker died of it.

The company [forced workers to come in](#) even if they were sick. Tyson's management should be put in jail, too.

Hamlet still has a large railroad yard. Why didn't some of the workers at Emmett

Rowe's deathtrap try to get a job there?

While railroads are more profitable than ever, the number of railroad workers has shrunk from 1.5 million in 1947 to [around 143,000 today](#). That's over 1.3 million jobs destroyed — a 90 percent drop.

What made these job cuts more heartbreak was that Black and women workers were finally being hired in many railroad jobs.

This took decades of struggle. Charles Hamilton Houston, who mentored Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, repeatedly went to the U.S. Supreme Court to fight discrimination on the railroads.

Instead of union railroad jobs, International Tie Disposal wants to build a plant next to CSX's Hamlet yard to dispose of old railroad ties. The facility will [emit harmful air emissions](#) near a poor community. That's called toxic racism.

Never forget the workers in Hamlet who died because of greed. Capitalism kills.



# Happy Labor Day — now drop dead

written by Struggle - La Lucha

September 8, 2021

At least 7.5 million workers will lose all their unemployment benefits on Sept. 6. Another 3 million workers will lose part of their income. That's how the capitalist government celebrates Labor Day.

Two million workers in California will be thrown off a cliff. So will 1.2 million in New York State and nearly a half-million in Pennsylvania.

What are jobless workers and their loved ones to do? Counting family members, 20 million or more people will be endangered.

Hunger will increase and so will people losing their homes. Food banks are bracing for an upsurge of need.

The cut-off on Labor Day comes after the U.S. Supreme Court declared the ban on evictions and foreclosures to be illegal. What should be illegal are rent-gouging landlords and banksters stealing homes.

Hardest hit will be Black and Latinx workers. The [official unemployment rate for Black workers](#) is 9.2 percent.

Ending the benefits comes after the capitalist economy added only 235,000 jobs in August instead of the predicted 720,000.

That gives the lie to the claim that unemployment benefits are an incentive for people not to work. [Even Forbes magazine](#) — the self-described “capitalist tool” — admits that isn’t true.

The jobs aren’t there. There are six million fewer people employed than last spring.

Yet President Biden [sent an Aug. 19 letter](#) to members of Congress that it was “appropriate” for the federal unemployment benefits to expire.

Who elected you, Joe? Is it “appropriate” for children and their parents to go hungry?

What’s needed is a fightback. That’s what the [Unemployed Workers Union](#) is doing in Maryland. It helped stop Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan from cutting unemployment benefits in July.

We need to increase the volume. If Congress doesn’t act to restore these absolutely necessary benefits, the labor movement should march on Washington, D.C., and the state capitals.

As Frederick Douglass said: “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”

Jobs or income now! Don’t starve — fight!



# Justice for Janitors fighting big tech, big banks for a fair contract

written by Struggle - La Lucha

September 8, 2021

Thousands of janitors across California have taken to the streets to fight for a fair union contract. On June 15, hundreds of janitors held a commemorative march in downtown Los Angeles. The action marked the 31st anniversary of [a brutal and unprovoked 1990 police attack](#) on a striking janitorial workers' protest in the posh Century City area of LA.

At the time, LAPD cops simply waded into the peaceful march beating people. One woman worker was pregnant and miscarried. Some workers were hospitalized. The outrage over the attack helped bring about a solid contract settlement and built sympathy and solidarity for Justice for Janitors as the United Service Workers West's (USWW) campaign came to be called.

The commemoration in June of that 1990 attack was also to announce new negotiations for a fair contract. Still without a contract, union janitors marched in six different locations throughout California on Aug. 15, including the pictured march of 800 through the streets of Hollywood. Negotiations for a new contract began in early 2020, but were cut short at the height of COVID-19 in March 2020. An extension of the union contract was put in place, which expires on Aug. 31.

USWW represents some 40,000 janitors, airport staff, security guards and workers in the entertainment industry. The Justice for Janitors division voted Aug. 20 to approve a strike if a fair contract is not wrested from management in September.

The president of USWW, David Huerta, spoke with Struggle-La Lucha by phone

about Justice for Janitors and the current negotiations.

**Struggle-La Lucha:** Good morning David. I want to ask how the negotiations are going, and I noticed signs at the Hollywood march addressing a number of different employers. Who is it that you negotiate with?

**David Huerta:** We have a “master contract” with multiple employers. The union bargains with a number of real estate management companies, but the real power behind the scenes are some of the biggest tech firms, law firms, biotech companies, entertainment industry giants throughout California, including Facebook, Google, Apple, Visa and others. They’re the ones who really control the purse strings.

**SLL:** During the march, one worker explained to me that you have been working with an expired contract. When did it expire and what protections have you had in the meantime?

**David Huerta:** At the time that the last contract expired we negotiated and won guarantees of some pandemic protective measures — protective equipment, a 50 cent wage increase across the board, a guarantee that laid-off staff have a right to return to work up to 2 years later, and quarantine pay.

We set aside other issues and got an extension of the contract. Much of what we bargained for were included in federal acts passed by the White House, but you’ve seen that a lot of workers without unions didn’t get those benefits. We insisted on them following up and we also worked to get our workers vaccinated right away.

The pandemic has exposed a lot of holes from the last 20 or 30 years. The Great Recession did a lot of damage to workers, too. Pensions — we have to rebuild pensions in this country. We have to continue the fight for good health care. Paid time off, too.

Yes, there are the economics we all think about. The GDP is up 6.5%, and there is

inflation. Corporations got loans and money from the CARES Act and other federal actions.

Our workers continued to sacrifice throughout the pandemic, there were infections, and even some deaths, and without our people they couldn't have kept operating. Even though we were called "essential workers," 14,000 of the jobs for our people were impacted by the pandemic. Now, we're back in negotiating and I can tell you, 3% won't be enough.

**SLL:** How bad were the covid infections among your members?

**David Huerta:** Watt Plaza in Century City was closed for a time because of mass infections. Several of our people got sick. One man spread covid to his wife, who passed away. There were others too. Fortunately, deaths were minimized because we worked to vaccinate 8,000 of our members as soon as vaccines were available.

United Healthcare Workers, another division of SEIU, helped get that done. But our people in Janitors for Justice are mostly immigrants. So many live in crowded living conditions, use mass transit and are less able to take time off work.

**SLL:** So the fact that your membership didn't have awful death numbers and massive infection numbers shows the power and protection of union membership. Can you talk a little more about the membership of USWW?

**David Huerta:** Gladly. Before getting unionized, thousands of janitors in California and elsewhere were traditionally African American workers. Then a shift came in the 1980s, with a wave of immigration. Immigrants coming here from Mexico and Latin America fulfilled janitorial jobs and the African American former janitorial workers shifted to security guard jobs. We helped to make that shift happen and organized and now represent the security guards in another division called Stand with Security as well as the janitorial workers in Janitors for Justice. These are all workers who

have been the lowest paid, most vulnerable. Immigrants come here to try to find a better life, leaving deep poverty behind, and they fight for a better life here. They face all kinds of discrimination. This is my motivation to do the job that I do. All of our staff, we see these people — the salt of the earth — work so hard and fight so hard for their families and that is our motivation.



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# Unemployed Workers Union and workers' power in the pandemic crisis

written by Struggle - La Lucha  
September 8, 2021

*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.



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## **Stop killing workers with heat!**

written by Struggle - La Lucha

September 8, 2021

There's nothing natural about the heat waves and massive forest fires scorching the earth. [Capitalist climate change](#) is unnatural.

Record high temperatures in the western United States and Canada are matched by temperatures of 100 degrees Fahrenheit in Siberia.

Yet millions of workers are forced to work in these dangerous conditions. Among them was [Oregon farmworker, Sebastian Francisco Perez](#), who collapsed and died on June 26, one day after his 38th birthday. He had been working in temperatures above 100 F.

Sebastian Perez came from the Guatemalan town of Ixcan to put food on our tables. Bigots want us to hate immigrants who are the majority of farmworkers.

California farmworkers have to work in 114-degree heat. The Golden State is one of only four states that have any regulations to protect workers from heatstroke. The other states are Minnesota, Washington and Oregon.

California requires bosses to provide workers with one quart of fresh water every hour. That didn't prevent [Maria Isabel Vasquez Jimenez from dying](#) in 95-degree heat in 2008. The 17-year-old was working on the grape harvest.

### **No heat safety regulations**

Forty-six states don't have any regulations to protect workers from heat death and injury. Neither does the federal government's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

That's despite the Center for Disease Control's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health requesting OSHA to do so in 1975. That was 46 years and nine U.S. presidents ago.

Government figures show 815 workers dying from heat between 1992 and 2017. Over 70,000 were injured. The real numbers are far higher.

Construction workers accounted for [36% of these heat deaths](#), six times their percentage of the workforce. But it isn't just workers who work outside who can die.

Millions of warehouse workers also suffer from extreme heat. During a 2011 heat wave, Amazon workers at the Breinigsville distribution center near Allentown, Pa., were pushed to meet production quotas.

Instead of opening loading dock doors to help ventilate the facility, supervisors kept them locked because they were worried about theft. Employee health was less important.

Amazon instead [stationed ambulances outside with paramedics](#) who would whisk away workers who had collapsed from the heat.

### **Organize against death**

There's nothing new about the rich driving workers to death in hot weather. Enslaved Africans had to work from "no see" in the morning to "no see" at night no matter what the weather was.

The reason why OSHA hasn't been allowed to issue any rules to protect workers from extreme heat is that it would cut into capitalists' profits. Treating Amazon workers humanely could cost Amazon big boss Jeff Bezos some of his \$200 billion stash. He might not be able to go on a space rocket again.

Even if the feds issued safety rules to protect workers from heat death and injury, who's going to enforce them? In 2019 there was only one full-time OSHA employee per 88,977 workers. Most workplaces [never see an OSHA inspector](#) for years.

Fox News wants us to get mad at anyone calling to defund the trigger-happy, club-swinging, choke-holding police. OSHA and other safety agencies have been defunded for years.

In 2016, New York City [cops issued 90,600 summons](#) to people for allegedly slaking their thirst with a cold beer or some other liquid refreshment. How about some “law and order” to keep capitalists from cooking workers to death?

Unions are what will really protect workers at Amazon and every business from injury and death. It’s only unions that will prevent workers from being fired for refusing to work in dangerous conditions.

Working and poor people die from the heat off the job, too. At least 739 people died from a [1995 heat wave in Chicago](#).

Workers can die on the job just because they’re not able to cool themselves during the night. Children and seniors are the greatest victims of heat waves like the one in Chicago.

With capitalism cooking the earth, air conditioning is more than ever a human right. Millions of families need free air conditioners and cheap electricity to operate them.

If the people are willing to fight for it, it can be won.



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# **Frito-Lay workers win strike against 'suicide shifts'**

written by Struggle - La Lucha  
September 8, 2021



Workers at the Frito-Lay factory in Topeka, Kansas, held their ground and won a favorable union contract after a solid three-week walkout. Frito-Lay is owned by PepsiCo and operates 30 other manufacturing centers throughout the country. The company made \$4.2 billion last year.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, to meet rising demand, instead of hiring more workers and paying decent wages, the bosses were imposing 12-hour shifts, separated by only 8 hours off, 7 days a week.

Lawsuits for racial discrimination, first in June 2020 and again in February 2021, pointed to the company passing over Black employees for promotions, and giving Black employees less training and more demanding jobs. The plant's workforce is

represented by Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers Local 218.

By early July, after nine months of negotiations hadn't yielded a fair offer for a new contract,

workers' frustrations were coming to a head. The punishing shifts and 84-hour workweeks were the straw that broke the camel's back, but stagnant wages, speedups, and unsafe working conditions were also a major factor in the struggle.

## **Two workers died on the job**

One of the striking workers, Cherie Renfro, wrote an opinion piece in a Topeka newspaper during the walkout that revealed that two workers have died under the harsh conditions being imposed. At the time of one of the deaths, the man collapsed while working and the bosses didn't even stop the production line. They had workers move the body so that a co-worker could stand in for him and production never stopped.

The company denies that it happened, but her account is backed up by co-worker and union steward Mark McCarter, who told Vice News, "I can tell you that many people have had heart attacks in the heat at Frito-Lay since I've been here. One guy died a few years ago and the company had people pick him up, move him over to the side, and put another person in his spot without shutting the business down for two seconds. It seems like I go to one funeral a year for someone who's had a heart attack at work or someone who went home to their barn and shot themselves in the head or hung themselves."

Workers also have complained about fire hazards because boxes are packed and stacked up without stopping. People have been working fast out of fear of retaliation, and exits are often blocked up by stacks of boxes.

Although Kansas is less unionized than the national average at less than 9%, Topeka is a union city. A full 26% of workers there are members of unions—well over double the national rate of 10.8%.

The membership at the Frito-Lay plant voted down an offer on July 3, when bosses offered wage increases that for many workers would have been less than 50 cents an hour. In this unionized city, as prices are increasing and as workers had been working throughout the pandemic and risking their health without even receiving hazard pay, the 50 cents per hour offer was insulting.

In several other unionized workplaces in Topeka, workers have won annual cost-of-living increases of 77 cents per hour, in addition to regular wage increases fought for and won in contract negotiations. The offer was in fact voted down because the company was trying to get away without adequately addressing the grueling “suicide shifts” as workers called them.

But the company’s bargaining team still tried to paint a picture of a generous offer being rejected by irresponsible union officers. They pushed the idea that they have a labor shortage, clinging to the corporate line that the Federal Unemployment Supplement established under the CARES Act was erasing incentive for the unemployed to work.

Frito-Lay’s practice of Amazon-style hyper exploitation shows their difficulty maintaining a workforce is self-inflicted. Union steward McCarter told the Topeka Capital-Journal, “The problem is they hire (new people) and then work them 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and after about a week of that, they go, ‘Oh no’ and don’t show up.”

### **Picket line solidarity**

As pitiful as their July 3 offer was, Frito-Lay bosses still sulked and walked away

from the bargaining table after it was rejected. That's when the workers at the Topeka plant hit the bricks.

When the walkout happened the bosses vowed to continue running the idled plant and sent a welcome message to any workers that cared to cross the picket line.

The e-mailed statement oozed with the confidence that bosses across the giant U.S. economy have developed during this long 4-decades of anti-union rampage. But 600 workers continued walking the picket line. UAW members from two different locals in Kansas City gathered money donations on Facebook, and food and supplies from small businesses and other union workers and then caravanned the hour-long drive to the picket line for a support rally.

Soon Frito-Lay snacks started to disappear from grocery store shelves. In just under three weeks the bosses blinked. The new contract bans suicide shifts and puts a cap on hours of 60 per week and at least one day off per week. Workers got a 4% raise over two years, and there will be a team of workers and management to address safety conditions in the plant.



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# Baltimore's unemployed workers speak out

written by Melinda Butterfield

September 8, 2021

Coming off its second court victory against Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan's plan to cut off federal pandemic unemployment relief early, the [Unemployed Workers Union](#) planned a Town Hall Assembly at Baltimore City Hall on July 29.

Organizers thought severe weather would force them to cancel. Yet despite a tornado warning in the area, over 30 people showed up, drawn by the opportunity to "Tell your story and let the world know that the crisis is not over!" The assembly went ahead as planned while activists kept a close eye on the skies.

"Thousands of Marylanders have still not received a dime of unemployment insurance and benefits owed to them," says the leaflet for the event. "Instead, their claims are languishing in hold, false fraud claims, or simply not being paid. Don't let the Labor Department sweep us under the rug."

"We are continuing to fight inside the courts, but that will not be enough. Only your voice and actions will ensure we win again."

The turnout, despite the threatening weather, demonstrates the severity of the crisis for unemployed workers in the state of Maryland.

"We will do this again so that many of those who were deterred by the storm and the tornado warnings get a chance to testify," UWU's Sharon Black said.

Watch the video and hear first-hand about the experiences of unemployed workers.



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## **Unemployed Workers Union wins court victory: 'We will continue to fight'**

written by Melinda Butterfield

September 8, 2021

July 13: The Unemployed Workers Union is encouraged by today's decision by

Baltimore Circuit Court Judge Lawrence Fletcher-Hill to grant a preliminary injunction to halt Governor Hogan's plan to end federal pandemic benefits early.

Along with the U.S. Department of Labor's requirement of a 30-day cut off notice, the judge's decision means that help will continue until September.

Today's court decision is a victory for unemployed Maryland workers, especially those who collect pandemic benefits. In many cases, this \$300 a week is the only funds available for workers who have exhausted benefits or are not covered under regular unemployment benefits.

Alec Summerfield, attorney for the Unemployed Workers Union, stated, "It may make the difference whether a worker eats or not, or between paying a utility bill, car payment, mortgage or rent."

Summerfield continued, "This addresses a part of our lawsuit; the second part revolves around the thousands of workers who have not seen a penny of their benefits, some for as long as a year, held up in the dysfunctional Maryland Labor Department's Unemployment Division."

Sharon Black, a representative of the Unemployed Workers Union, added: "We will not stop until every worker receives the benefits that they are owed. This includes continuing our lawsuit and holding protests and assemblies where workers can speak out."

At a news conference following the judge's ruling, Black declared "You were responsible for this victory!" She was addressing the thousands of unemployed workers across Maryland who've joined the effort.

"There have been many messages of thanks to our attorney and organizers. But none of us won this victory. It was your efforts — your ability to remain focused, to amplify your voice in any way possible, to sacrifice and stay the course that got us this far.

"The grievances you filed, the picket lines you attended, even the emails and social media posts, created the irresistible force that led to this decision.

"We still have miles to travel on this road until everyone is paid. Please do not stop."

The [Unemployed Workers Union](#) will be announcing future activities soon. In the meantime, if you have an eviction emergency, reach out to UWU representative Joyce B. by email at [stillsmiling4eva@gmail.com](mailto:stillsmiling4eva@gmail.com).

Don't forget our weekly Unemployed and Workers' Rights Clinic, Thursdays from 6 pm to 8 pm at 2011 N. Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218. Just show up — no need to make an appointment. Please come and fill out a grievance form.



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## New Orleans firefighters turn up

# the heat, march on City Hall

written by Struggle - La Lucha  
September 8, 2021



On July 1, the New Orleans Firefighters Association led a march downtown. In the heat of the day, they set out from Fire Station 14 to City Hall, where they entered the City Council chambers and forced a vote in favor of a pay raise for firefighters. The contingent was made up of firefighters of different nationalities and genders, all united behind the union's demands for increased pay and better working conditions.

When they entered the chambers, the council was voting on a resolution to raise pay for city contract workers to \$13.25 per hour by 2022, and to \$15 per hour by 2023. This pay increase falls far short of what is needed, but it is a concession resulting from workers' struggles across the country.

Firefighters Association President Aaron Mishler was clear that the union supports this measure 100%, because the workers who create all the wealth of society deserve to thrive. But he said that firefighters and other city employees need a raise just like the contract workers.

Mishler said, "We have a 26-year firefighter who makes \$15.50 an hour." Right now, the starting pay for a New Orleans firefighter is only \$11.60 per hour.

Firefighter Sean Thomas spoke before the council: "I work three other jobs. I only see my 2-year-old son once a week for about an hour while he's awake."

Thomas' story is not unique. The union has been battling City Hall for years because of low pay and dangerous understaffing. Between 2010 and 2020, staffing decreased by 25%, while the number of calls went up 150%. Frequently, they are forced to send out trucks with only two firefighters.

On April 4, the Firefighters Association posted on Facebook, "We're at 75% capacity on our best days." This is dangerous for the whole city.

When they were put on the spot, the council voted unanimously for the pay raise. According to the agreed-upon timeline, the chief administrative officer must give a report by mid-August on the logistics of the pay raise. Additionally, the Civil Service Commission will give a report by October.

The fight may not be over, but this is a major victory for the city's firefighters, who have been organizing for so long.



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# **The case for Maryland's unemployed workers to go before judge today**

written by Struggle - La Lucha  
September 8, 2021



The Unemployed Workers Union's case on behalf of Maryland's unemployed workers is slated to go before a judge today. Today, June 30, 2021, we could hear whether we are granted a temporary restraining order on Hogan's halt of federal pandemic benefits while the case is set for court.

There will be a full press briefing, regardless of the outcome, 45 minutes after we get any news of what is decided, at Elijah Cummings Court House, 111 N. Calvert Street, Baltimore, MD.

Attorney Alec Summerfield stated, "We are urging the courts to make a decision quickly to address what can only be described as a humanitarian crisis for Maryland's unemployed workers. These workers are facing foreclosures, car repossession, and economic disaster; this urgent crisis impacts entire families."

Union representative Sharon Black added, "Regardless of the judge's decision, we

will continue to fight until every unemployed worker gets justice. On Tuesday, July 5, 2021, at 2 pm, we will picket the Labor Secretary, Tiffany Robinson's office at 500 North Calvert Street, Baltimore, MD 21202.

Both Summerfield and Black added, "Regardless of the outcome of our case, both Hogan and Robinson can do the right thing and pay Marylanders what they are owed. They do not have to wait on the outcome of a lawsuit."

The Unemployed Workers Union has now received over 2,500 individual grievances of workers who have yet to receive benefits, some dating to over a year, some on hold or falsely labeled fraud. Other unemployed workers are still locked out of their Beacon accounts. The grievances document the specifics and the harm inflicted on themselves and their families.

Union representatives have underscored that the group will not rest until every single unemployed Marylander receives justice.

