Angaza Laughinghouse Oral History Transcription

Abstract
Angaza Laughinghouse is one of the founders of the political organization Black Workers for Justice based in Raleigh, North Carolina. Laughinghouse first got involved in activism in New York where he grew up, before moving to North Carolina after hearing about the Charlotte Three and the Wilmington Ten. He began community and workplace organizing after the Greensboro Massacre. Black Workers for Justice came to be as a result of protests against unfair treatment of female workers at a K-Mart in Rocky Mount. They strive to empower workers to stand up for their own needs both in the workplace and in the community. They have also been active in political campaigns and have had members run for election.

Key Terms
- Abner Berry
- Abner Berry Freedom Library and Workers' Center
- AFL-CIO
- African Liberation Support Committee
- Amiri Baraka
- Andre Knight
- Angela Davis
- Anne Shepard Turner
- Apartheid
- Art Pope
- Assata Shakur
- Ben Chavis
- Bill Harvey
- Black Freedom Movement
- Black Liberation Movement
- Black Power Movement
- Black Workers for Justice
- Black Workers for Justice at K-Mart
- Charlene Mitchell
- Charlotte Three
- Crabtree Valley Mall
- Communist Workers Party Five
- Dennis Carroll
- Dennis Orton
- Emma Gresham
Farmworker Legal Services of North Carolina
Federal Bureau of Alcohol and Tobacco
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Greensboro Massacre
Hardwood Dimension Mill
Irv Joyner
Jesse Jackson
Jim Grant
Jim Waller
Julius Chambers
K-Max Construction
Legal Alliance for Greensboro Justice
Malcolm X
Martin Luther King
NAACP
Naima Muhammad
National Black Independent Political Party
National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression
National Black United Front Work
Nelson Johnson
Nelson Mandela
Nevelene Harvey
Rainbow Campaign
Reverend John Mendez
Saladin Muhammad
Sandi Smith
Schlage Lock
Shiloh Coalition for Community Control and Improvement
Signe Waller
Sonia Sanchez
Southern Workers Coalition
Steve Bater
Steven Edelstein
Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)
Student Mobilization Project
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
Student Organization for Black Unity
Sue Perry
Taft-Hartley
Wilmington Ten
Workers Viewpoint Organization
Youth Organization for Black Unity
LAUREN GERALD: Okay, so I guess we’ll start with your upbringing, just to go in chronological order.

ANGAZA LAUGHINGHOUSE: I was born in Brooklyn, New York to two southerners Gloria and (indiscernible) Laughinghouse form Greenville, North Carolina, and during the… they came up, migrated to Brooklyn, New York in the 1950s, the late 40s, 50s, and grew up there. They were working class parents. My dad made it to eighth grade. Mom made it to eleventh. She worked as a domestic cleaning rich white folks’ homes—dentists’, doctors’ homes. My dad was a factory worker and worked two, three, four, five other jobs on the side. I learned a lot since I used to go to work with him. Matter of fact, often times, went to that factory with him and began to get a sense of what factory life was like. He encouraged us to hit the books hard. My mother and dad encouraged us to hit the books hard, which we did. They gave us a little extra assignment. We weren’t able to sit around and read comic books and play all day. We were told to hit the libraries, read, hit the museums – New York’s full of great museums – and all that seemed exciting to me since she let us travel on the trains of New York, the subway trains, you know, by ourselves. I also worked quite a few jobs, as a ferrier, a factory worker, janitor. This is all between the age of, I don’t know, thirteen and about sixteen, seventeen. Later on, my dad began to form his own little, small little businesses and we worked for him. You know,
this is like moving trucks and moving furniture, those sort of things. Walking up, I don’t know, twenty flights of stairs with heavy furniture. It made for some big strong boys, I guess. Later on, hung out at Stuyvesant High School, Peter Stuyvesant High School in Lower Manhattan. It was a pretty active activist sort of group there. Hung out with them, participated in the student mobilization against the war in the late 1960s and 70s. Joined the African American Society. This is during the 1960s and 70s, during the time of the Freedom Movement, Black Power Movement, and our ears were always attuned to what folks were saying, what Stokely Carmichael later on known as Kwame Ture and Dr. King and certainly Malcolm X, since I only lived ten blocks away from where Malcolm used to speak at the Audubon Ballroom on 168th and Saint Nicholas Avenue. So all this was catching a young man’s attention. Sounded pretty exciting to me, you know, with the problems we were having in our community. At that time, hospital workers were organizing, teachers were going on strike. You know, we have powerful Teachers Unions in New York. There were struggles going on for black studies at the City University of New York. There was the Black Arts movement developing with Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, and a host of other great artists. All this captured my attention. I began floating around and going to some of these activities. Boy, it was a great political awakening for a young teenager. Later on, joined an organization where I met some of the people I’m working with now.
Joined SOBU, the Student Organization for Black Unity, and the Youth Organization for Black Unity, the African Liberation Support Committee, where I met Saladin Muhammad and Abner Berry and ran into quite a few other Black Workers for Justice—people who are now Black Workers for Justice members, like Dennis Orton who is the leader of SOBU-YOBU and Nelson Johnson, Reverend Mendez, all of them were members of the same organization I was a member of. So had a great time learning and participating in some of the community struggles, but I got to North Carolina by virtue of meeting and learning about the Charlotte Three and the Wilmington Ten. Dr. Jim Grant was one of the Charlotte Three and as you know Ben Chavis was one of the leaders of the Wilmington Ten. Used to write to him while he was in jail, during the seventies, while Ben and Jim were in jail. Built a great relationship with Jim Grant and he recruited me along with Irv Joyner while I was at Rutgers University to come work on a project called the Student Mobilization Project where students would come south and work on major civil rights issues down here in North Carolina. And you know, my grandmother’s just down the road there in Greenville so I came to Raleigh, and later on, after I graduated from Rutgers Law School, had an opportunity to meet Sandi Smith and a host of other members from the Workers Viewpoint Organization.
GERALD: Really quick, can you just go back and explain what the Charlotte Three and the Wilmington Ten are?

00:05:25 LAUGHINGHOUSE: Charlotte Three, these were freedom fighters, civil rights activists, right here in North Carolina. The Charlotte Three were a group of young people who at that time were challenging segregated facilities and Jim Crow and apartheid here in North Carolina. They were convicted for burning down the Lazy B horse stable where they denied African Americans the right to participate or enjoy the services riding horses there. The Wilmington Ten, these were political activists again challenging, they had a long history of challenging Jim Crow segregation here in North Carolina and ten folks, Anne Shepard Turner, Ben Chavis, and a host of other young folks were arrested again. They were accused of shooting back when they were shot at, from a church down there in Wilmington, and they too were all imprisoned for their activities. They were like political prisoners. So it was a big movement that was developed by the National, I think it was called the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, led by Angela Davis and a host of other folks. I’m trying to remember her name – Charlene Mitchell and a host of other activists and long time freedom fighters. They fought for the freedom of the Wilmington Ten and the Charlotte Three. They engaged lots of young people, like yourselves, in the particular campaign, and I became very active, getting signatures and setting up films and speaking.
engagements, and later on, working on the actual case along with Irv Joyner who worked on both the Wilmington Ten case and the Charlotte Three.

MARCUS MONTAÑO: Can you talk about your relationship with Jim Grant and your first encounter?

00:07:33 LAUGHINGHOUSE: My first encounter was with Jim Grant when he wrote for our student newspaper from the jail that he was in, the federal jail that he was in. He used to write for the African World which was the newspaper of the Youth Organization for Black Unity. So first learned of Jim through his writing articles for our student newspaper. You know, to have political prisoners write for a student newspaper was pretty interesting and we used to write them letters, back and forth, and students would get responses from Jim and he would share the history his work with SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and his long history of being a community organizer and a freedom fighter.

GERALD: What was it about the Charlotte Three and the Wilmington Ten that made you decide to come down to North Carolina?

00:08:36 LAUGHINGHOUSE: The question of political repression. I was very familiar with it in New York City, where I recall the police throwing kids who were activists off the top of some of those tall buildings and getting away with it. I recall the
police disrupting some of our community, youth community meetings, when we were organizing regarding the police response to working class and black kids in the communities I grew up in, Brooklyn and Manhattan. I saw a connection between the political repression of Jim Grant and the Charlotte Three and Ben Chavis and the Wilmington Ten and knew that this was something very important, to support other struggles against government repression.

GERALD: Okay.

LAUGHINGHOUSE: As you all know, or you may not know, that there was a counterintelligence program also at the time that the government had participated in whose job was to repress all these activists, particular radical activists, left activists who were involved in all these movements at the time.

GERALD: Okay, so when you came down to North Carolina, which region did you come to and what kind of work were you doing?

LAUGHINGHOUSE: When I came down to North Carolina, thanks to Irv Joyner and his invitation for me to come down and work with the Student Mobilization Project, I came down to Raleigh-Durham in 1978, primarily because also I have family here. There’s 400 Laughinghouses scattered through the southern region, a few hundred of them are
right here in North Carolina, stretched out from Charlotte all the way down to Greenville, Farmville, eastern North Carolina. So I figured, gee, man, this is home. I’ve been down here every year, every summer of my life. As a little kid I used to—every summer when school let out in New York City I used to come down and hang out with my family. And I recall just the repression, the political and social differences in the south, particularly Line St and Boundary St, the demarcation line for apartheid in Greenville, North Carolina. I know we couldn’t go across those streets, it wasn’t for black folks. Black folks had to stay in their section of town. So all those things told me that this was something that I could learn a lot from with these other experienced organizers and activists. So I came down and worked with the Student Mobilization Project. Then, the following year, there was a shooting of five well known leftists organizers, union organizers, community organizers, known as the Communist Workers Party Five. They were also members of an organization which I was familiar with, the Workers Viewpoint Organization, which was a left organization based out of New York but had members around the country. So I knew some of the people that were murdered on November 3, 1979. They were leaders in some of the organizations that I had participated in as a teenager. They were leaders of the Youth Organization for Black Unity like Nelson Johnson, Sandi Smith. They were leaders of the African Liberation Support Committee like Jim Waller and Signe (Waller) and all these other
activists. Knowing these folks, knowing the great work they had always done over the years, trying to organize unions here in North Carolina, in the south, and trying to organize communities, I knew they needed my help, I joined the Legal Alliance for Greensboro Justice along with Irv Joyner, Julius Chambers, and a host of other lawyers from around the United States. Began working on the cases and speaking, raising funds to help develop resources to support the legal work and the political work in the community since when the Greensboro Massacre occurred, when the Klan and the Nazis rolled up and murdered the five folks in the Morningside projects in Greensboro, it put an unbelievable chill on all the organizing in the entire region. I just knew that it was important for people to come out and support this particular fight against racist and government repression since the FBI and Federal Bureau of Alcohol and Tobacco had been engaged in some way with this whole massacre either with undercover agents who encouraged it or police, Greensboro police officers, who knew that this incident was going to occur. They knew that there was going to be some bad blood between the Nazis and the leftists organizing in this community but they did nothing. The police officers did nothing to stop it. So I knew it was very important to step up and engage with Irv Joyner and Julius Chambers and a host of other activist lawyers to get involved in this particular support effort.
GERALD: You said you were doing legal work. What types of things specifically were you doing?

LAUGHINGHOUSE: Well, as a lawyer, I helped, just right out of Rutgers Law School and also a member of the National Conference of Black Lawyers, I had some similar or familiar experiences. While at Rutgers, they had a legal clinic where I remember working on some of the work with Irv Joyner regarding Assata Shakur who at that time was in prison in Rahway State Prison, so I was making use of some of the skills that I had picked up as a young lawyer at Rutgers Law School and right after I left Rutgers.

GERALD: So when did you start working for Black Workers for Justice?

00:14:20 LAUGHINGHOUSE: Never worked for Black Workers for Justice. I don’t get paid for Black Workers for Justice. I am one of the founding members of Black Workers for Justice. After the Greensboro Massacre, there was such a chill in terms of organizing, ran into Jim Grant again at Farmworker Legal Services of North Carolina and Steven Edelstein and one of the things that Jim and I did when we finished our work every day, because my experience has always been as an organizer, I never got paid to do organizing. Basically it was something I did after work on a volunteer basis. Some real commitment beyond getting paid to doing this work, so Jim Grant and I whenever we clicked
off work at five or six, we would go through some of these rural counties, I don’t know, about fourteen, fifteen of them and we’d start organizing grassroots community groups, in Hamlet, NC and Martin County and Duplin County, in Faison. We’d have meetings in the funeral homes since some people were afraid to have them in their churches because of the repression and the racist character of some of these leaders in these towns. So we began organizing grassroots community organizations. I think Jim and I must have organized, in a period of a few years, at least fourteen of these organizations. And while we were organizing, we ran into a good friend of ours Saladin Muhammad that we had known from the African Liberation Support work that we had done back in the seventies and we began doing what most organizers do when you see other advanced, experienced organizers and veteran freedom fighters, people who have experience in the black liberation movement. You sit down and you talk and you figure out how you can work together. Saladin was working at that time, along with Abner Berry, a long time veteran freedom fighter—he’s in history books, Abner Berry, also known as Brother Babuth Tumdeh (spelling?). And Naima Muhammad, they were working on pulling together some women who were struggling against sex and race discrimination at a K-Mart in Rocky Mount. They were forming this organization called Black Workers for Justice at K-Mart. That was in December 1981. No, it was probably a little earlier, but it was in 1981. He called upon me and others to help
support that fight. So at that time Jim Grant and I were building this huge worker’s assembly of grassroots groups, two-three hundred people from fourteen counties attended. And we invited the organizers from Black Workers for Justice at K-Mart to come to and speak out at this worker’s assembly, which we held in Martin County. That was 1981. They spoke, and we continued to talk about the need to organize black workers. As we continued to organize, and I continued my conversations along with Saladin and some of the other workers in this assembly, we said we really needed to form, not a workplace organization but a broader organization of black working people so that we could better organize for power in the workplaces and communities. In December 1982, we held the very first statewide Black Workers for Justice assembly. This was the founding of the statewide organization known as Black Workers for Justice. It was a historic meeting. We packed the first Baptist church down in Fremont, North Carolina. Leaders such as Billy Harvey was in attendance. People such as Dennis Carroll. People such as Nevelene Harvey and Naima Muhammad and Saladin, all of us were present as we tried to struggle around, developing a program—what was going to be a mission, goal, and program of this particular black workers organization that would organize in the workplace and community. Out of that, we adopted a resolution. It was entitled, Where We Stand, and it listed out the program for Black Workers for Justice, and stated the importance of organizing black workers not only in
the freedom movement, the black liberation movement, but in the workplace is key to organizing unions in the south. Particularly in the eastern part of North Carolina where many people, many African American people, reside there. They reside in the eastern part of the state. That’s where the most of the plantations were during the time. And many black folks still live in eastern North Carolina. So that was the beginning of Black Workers for Justice in December 1981 in Fremont, North Carolina.

GERALD: You mentioned it a little bit. Can you talk more about what was happening at K-Mart?

00:19:18 LAUGHINGHOUSE: Well, what was going on at K-Mart was what was happening in many eastern North Carolina workplaces or probably for that matter, most workplaces in the south. Where workers don’t have unions, they’re often times of victim of racism, sexism, and just unfair treatment. The struggle in K-Mart was a struggle to empower the workers in that workplace by organizing a workplace committee where they could file the petitions, bring their issues to other organizations and churches like the NAACP and some of the powerful churches in Rocky Mount, and try to rally the community to help alter the balance of power in that workplace so that workers could have their issues addressed.

GERALD: And what type of issues were they dealing with?
LAUGHINGHOUSE: Sexism, unequal pay, male supervisors—white male supervisors because all the supervisors were white males at that time, asking the black women to shave their legs. Sometimes we know these are cultural things. Their view was, What does that have to do with what they do on the floor or as retail folks in terms of their workplace? So those were some of the issues, unequal pay, lack of job promotions of African Americans, particularly women, and racism, racist epithets, those sort of things.

GERALD: Because you helped enable them to organize, were they able to overcome these issues?

LAUGHINGHOUSE: Yes, there were car caravans at the community joint throughout the Rocky Mount community. There was suits filed. There was regular workplace meetings of the workers. It’s very important to understand that it was the workers themselves that challenged management and pushed for these changes. Black Workers for Justice’s thinking has always been, We have to empower the workers in their workplace and community. It’s not just, you know, people coming in to help.

GERALD: During this time, was it harder for the workers? Did they feel like they couldn’t turn to anyone else to represent them?
LAUGHINGHOUSE: I think they represented themselves. That is the thinking of more experienced and what I call, advanced organizers because they understand, it’s not a question of helping them. I think it’s a question of how do we empower everyday workers to be the leaders of their own causes. I don’t think men can help lead women in the struggle against patriarchy and sexism and chauvinism. The women themselves have to lead themselves. Similarly workers have to be in power and you have to help make sure you nurture their leadership capacity and skills in order for them to take on these challenges. I don’t think we’re just trying to help pull workers out of one hole. We’re trying to empower them to continue to fight for the things that they need in their everyday lives in their workplace and communities. Our whole piece was how do we get support for the workers’ struggle, but the workers would lead themselves.

GERALD: Okay. So then after the issues at K-Mart, what other things did Black Workers for Justice do?

LAUGHINGHOUSE: Oh boy! After that very first workers’ assembly, we identified many other workplace struggles and issues that were going on. There were struggles going on in packinghouses with Kate Pickles (?) which BWFJ member, Black Workers for Justice member, Dennis Carroll led. There were struggles to begin to organize municipal workers. There were struggles to collect over 8,000 signatures as we fought for the national King holiday way
back in 1982. I think people forget that that was a people’s campaign. It wasn’t just the good graciousness of government that gave us the King holiday. People fought, struggled, wrote letters, mobilized, rallied, and collected signatures. I’ll never forget, we still have those 8,000 signatures—copies of them at least—that we presented, on the national level. Also we did a similar campaign to fight for the statewide recognition. We did all that in 1982. Also, we formed other community organizations in working class communities, such as the Shiloh Coalition for Community Control and Improvement, where they were struggling for clean drinking water here in Wake County, and also struggling against a major company contaminating their drinking water. Also, we were engaged at that time against a struggle against apartheid, which was going on. You know, many of us recall in the seventies, when we were members of the African Liberation Support Committee which had dissipated, disappeared. Many of us knew that that was a struggle we had to continue to support. We’ll never forget what Malcolm taught us. He said if you don’t understand what’s happening in Africa or the Congo, you certainly don’t understand what’s happening down in Mississippi, so we knew that we had to link our struggle to the struggle against apartheid, so we were involved in supporting African Liberation work and the freedom of Nelson Mandela, the struggle against anti-apartheid in the early 80s. We also participated in the National Black Independent Political Party work and the National Black
United Front Work, but always trying to make sure we brought forth the leadership of actual workers and some of their struggles so that would become a part of the platform of the National Independent Political Party and the National Black United Front. I think we also had a major campaign down in Fremont, North Carolina where we also were engaged in a fight to unionize Hardwood Dimension Mill. It was a wood mill, in this isolated small town called Fremont in Wayne County, North Carolina. These were just some of the many struggles that we engaged in, but the struggle that I know I took a leading role in for the organization was as a Durham City worker. I used to work for the city of Durham. We began to actually help revitalize an old Durham City workers union. I think it had fallen off, and lucky if there fifteen members. Through the work of Black Workers for Justice and this is one of my key divisions of labor, we rebuilt that union to a union of over 240 members. These were the sort of struggles that we engaged in, struggles against asbestos being improperly torn out of public housing buildings like in Chavis Heights in Raleigh, where the kids were jumping in piles of asbestos that was just thrown out in piles, just outside blowing all over the place. We engaged workers in stopping that, filing charges against K-Max Construction for their illegal disposal of asbestos. We also began working with the Jesse Jackson campaign in '84. We took all these issues and we pushed the Jesse Jackson campaign on this question of a Workers’ Bill of Rights. Matter of fact, we
built our own Black Workers Political Platform Campaign and we engaged in the Rainbow work, mobilizing people around the Rainbow Campaign and the election of Jackson, and we thought it was very important that he was raising up this question of a Workers’ Bill of Rights that we had pushed for from the bottom. We also began to run during this election some of our own members from Black Workers for Justice. We ran Billy Harvey for Town Commissioner for the town of Fremont. Now it has a majority of African American people. I think the breadth and depth of the work of Black Workers for Justice has just been tremendous. I’m honored to continue to be a loyal, consistent member and leader in this organization. As one of the cofounders we also formed a group that worked on building our first newsletter in 1983. This is all tying in all of these issues in the fight for Dr. King. We founded Justice Speaks newsletter, which later on in 1985 became Justice Speaks newspaper. It raised up all these issues. We got workers to write articles on these community struggles, workplace struggles, challenging the racism and the job discrimination and the need for unions to come south. Matter of fact, one of our first newspapers put out the call to organize the south. Today we hear a lot of discussion about the AFL-CIO passing a resolution at its national convention about creative ways to begin to organize the south. Black Workers for Justice has always tried to make that call to come up with creative ways to organize what we call pre-majority unions. These are
unions that may not have collective bargaining rights or have a contract or go through a union election, but yet they have a workplace committee. We began organizing workplace committees, but we also understood in these workplaces that women had their own unique special oppression going on, not only in the workplace but in the community. So somewhere around 1986, we developed what we called a Women’s Commission and a Trade Union Commission. Can you imagine a small organization of hundreds of black workers organizing their own trade union commission? Here we tried to further define this question of new ways of trying to organize unions in the south. We also understood the importance of building national and international solidarity. We started in 1986, five different trips, sending our members to Cuba, sending our members to other places around the world so they can see how other workers were taking up this question of organizing. Our national historian committee also at this time found out that since most of our members—I can say 99% of our members work as volunteers, people sometimes think we’re a non-profit, 501-C3. We’re not that. We’re a political grassroots organization. We’re a political organization. We have no paid staff. At one point, we were able to get some funds to fund some of our members for very short periods of time, but for the most part we’re everyday workers who take our time after work or our time before work or our lunch hours or the time that I’m using here today, my leave time, to do this sort of work. So again, with the
elections coming up in ’86, we again ran some other members. We ran Emma Gresham for mayor of Keysville on a program of Workers’ Bill of Rights, healthcare, health clinics, so we always ran grassroots workers during these campaigns. But I think one of the best tributes we made to one of the founding members, one of our founding members was Abner Berry, who I mentioned earlier. We founded in 1987 the Abner Berry Freedom Library and Workers’ Center. We opened that at 216 Atlantic Avenue, and that became the headquarters for our national organization. At that time, Black Workers for Justice was spreading out all over the place. We had members in D.C., Maryland, Georgia, Mississippi, Keysville, we were recruiting members all over. We began to participate in some of the electoral political campaigns, but always from the standpoint of independent political action. We didn’t think we could just link on to these democrats or any other political party. We thought it was important that we have a program, a platform, that we have independent political action, and we ran candidates. We sent delegations to the National Democratic Convention in 1988. Again, pushing for the Rainbow Workers’ Bill of Rights Campaign. We organized our own people’s clinics. At this time, healthcare was already an issue. It was brought before the National Democratic Convention. So we’d been pushing on some of these issues for a long time, and we began building our own health clinics. We built one up in Shiloh in Wake County and another one in Bloomer Hill in the Rocky
Mount area, another one down in the Wilson-Fremont area. We had another health clinic. These were very important considering there was certainly lots of workers without healthcare and we knew the importance of healthcare screening with all workers. These were multinational efforts. By that I mean it was very diverse. White workers, black worker. We all worked together for these clinics because it benefitted everyone. We took on more organizing campaigns. We tried to organize a union at Schlage Lock, which made locks down in Rocky Mount. At that time, they were trying to run away to Mexico, leaving some contamination in the Rocky Mount area. We engaged larger numbers of people in the community, politicians to deal with these issues, particularly the issue of making sure workers got some compensation upon their departing as well as an extension of their healthcare since many of them were sick from the contamination that Schlage Lock created there in Rocky Mount in 1989. But again, we always built new forms of worker organizations. Workers’ unity councils where we had unorganized workers, informal workplace committees meeting with unions. Tobacco workers union. Whatever union was in the area, we tried to create these new forms of worker organizations while we tried to raise the question of why we needed more help of national unions to do more union organizing in the south. We also worked with many young folks at that time, I recall, particularly after this major national conference in 1990. There was a major conference on Malcolm X. They were
bringing this working class hero of mine and many others. The important lessons that he had shared with the Black Freedom Movement and the Black Liberation Movement. I’ll never forget out of that conference of some of our Black Workers for Justice youth there was a formation of what we call the Boycott Crabtree Mall because Crabtree Mall at that time cut the bus lines loose. They said no more buses on Saturdays between the black community in southeast Raleigh to Crabtree. We said if you’re going to cut the bus line so that black kids can’t come out to the mall, the black community’s going to just boycott Crabtree. And as you know, we were very successful in that since most workers (who worked) at Crabtree in the 1990s were African Americans, and we’re certainly a large percentage of the people that shop there as well. So we formed this Black Belt Youth Brigade. That’s what came out of the Crabtree boycott and the Malcolm X conference. These were very important pieces in terms of developing the next wave of leaders inside the Black Workers for Justice.

GERALD: For the youth brigade, was it easy for you to organize people to boycott the Crabtree Mall?

LAUGHINGHOUSE: Hey I can tell you, the youth were on fire. Sometimes it’s not a question of me. I got to say that I am just one of many very sharp leaders in a group that believes in empowering workers, women, and youth. The youth played a key role in the boycott. They’re the ones
that mobilize other youth. They’re the ones that figured out how to get them there without a bus. We didn’t have the resources to do all that since as I shared with you before, we are not one of those 501-C3’s where millions of dollars are given to us to do this work. We’re an organization—a political organization of committed working people who volunteer or do this on a nonpaid basis. We don’t see it as volunteerism. We just have a commitment to doing this kind of work. We know it won’t happen unless we make this commitment.

MONTAÑO: It seems like you’re in a period of expansion at this time, reaching out to more youth and you mentioned expanding past North Carolina. Can you talk about when exactly that was and when you started moving more into southern states?

00:36:08 LAUGHINGHOUSE: Well, I think in that period we were in a period of building what we call the Black Workers Unity Movement. I think we understood the importance of bringing young workers in. Too often, students don’t see themselves as workers. We know there has to be. I mean, what is the main things students do when they graduate? They look for work, right? So we knew there was some importance in trying to help build some class consciousness, them seeing themselves as workers. So we saw that as a very important part of our work, and we still see it as a very important part of our work. As you know, we saw the importance of growing the organization beyond North
Carolina as an important part of our work. I think right now we’re probably in a revitalization period. After 33 years of this sort of effort, there’s ups and downs and challenges and new periods. So we’re in a new period where we’re constantly revitalizing, renewing, bringing some new thinking, bringing the new thinking of younger members into Black Workers for Justice. Certainly, the Black Workers Unity Movement, the Black Belt Youth Brigade helped us understand the importance of trying to broaden out amongst the original base of the organization which was just basically workers and workplaces in ten different counties here in North Carolina. In 1991, we had an opportunity again to assess the breadth and depth of our work. We had what we call a Black Workers for Justice Membership Assembly. We do these pretty regularly. We call them Black Workers for Justice Membership Assemblies. This is when we try to

**LAUGHINGHOUSE:** They had a special convention in 2001. Just for 9/11 dealing with challenging the history of denial of human rights and racism. We also did marches for Juneteenth with many of our brown brothers so they can learn about our people’s history. All this secured in the late 2000s. We continued to also develop an international women’s conference in, where we met with women from Venezuela, Brazil who had similar issues. We know that our struggle is not just a work place struggle – we know that it’s broader than that. And we
know that many other people face that oppression in their workplace and in their country as we do.

So we take risk. We follow the radical tradition in the African-American experience and I recall right after 9/11 there was a march of over 7,000 people – we had to say no to the war in Iraq when Bush was pushing for the war. It was not that popular. In fact, some black folks in our communities thought we were traders. But we knew we were on the right side of history and too often when people are afraid to step up, Black Workers for Justice, through its own understanding of history – and you do know that we do a lot of studying. We gotta study some history if we’re going to learn from history. And that’s what we do. We have a lot of discussions, studies, and sharing readings. We try to do this with everyday workers. We believe that everyday workers can lead themselves. If you empower them with a sense of their history and mission. And help make sure that their leadership skills are where they need them to lead their own struggles.

In 2004, we launched our International Justice Campaign, challenging North Carolina violating International Human Rights,

GERALD: I just wanted to go back to 9/11 and how you were protesting the war.

LAUGHINGHOUSE: Yes. We tried to mobilize the black community: black workers, primarily and black churches. We spoke at churches. We spoke at our unions. About why this was an
unjust war. We’ve seen the US in Vietnam, claim that they were fighting for democracy, when in reality they were on the wrong side of history, as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X reminded people back in the day.

Similarly the U.S. didn’t support the struggle against apartheid. It’s really amazing; later on you see how they clean their act up. Particularly around the freedom of Nelson Mandela, when they closed down Wall Street for an hour or two to ring the bell. But we know that they hated Nelson Mandela because of the struggle against apartheid and the liberation there represented struggle, to control their own resources. Similarly in Iraq to try and control the oil and resources in that region. they were on the wrong side of that struggle.

The struggle against apartheid represented over the years. That’s what our experience has been. We tried to share that experience with everyday workers. Hopefully we can work with some stigmas.

Where it can be usable. But more importantly was the effort of the Black Workers for Justice to find other unions and organizations such as ours could do a better job organizing. So we really welcomed the opportunity, 2005, to go to Brazil to do the world social forum where we met with leaders from Casatu, which is the South African Trade Union Federation. We met with other grassroots organization,
political organizations just like ours, boy that was an unbelievable learning experience. When we came back we got hit with Katrina. Again, another important lesson that we learned about the importance of being better organized in our communities so we could alter the power relations and they still have not recovered. It seems like they displaced a large number of people of color in those communities.

So again, these were experiences that we had at Black Workers for Justice that helped us begin to understand the importance of organizing black workers around, not just organizing unions but the broader social justice issues in our community.

MONTAÑO: So what kind of things did you do to help with Katrina?

Well number one, we sent some of our members down there to actually help with some of the day-to-day tasks of cleaning up. We also helped by sending some of our leaders there struggle around the question of building political organization so that the impact of trying to address the survivors, so that we could have some impact and trying to figure out how to empower them. We actually had members there, certainly the Fruit of Labor singing ensemble worked with some of its friends and the cultural circles in the South and putting on a major production in the Carolina theatre in Durham to raise money to politicize people about the importance of struggling to empower the survivors down in the gulf coast.
MONTAÑO: So if we can go back to conception of Black Workers for Justice and what really was the impetus of forming it?

LAUGHINGHOUSE: Well the main reason for organizing Black Workers for Justice is that historically, the black freedom movement and the black liberalization movement have not had a strong representation of everyday workers; particularly in this period. In the earlier periods with the Detroit revolutionary union movement, mostly workers with the fight against the racism in the construction industry, in New York in the late 60s and 70s. Basically people like Jim Horton and FIGHT BACK

But today needed to have a very strong voice and presence of black working class folks. Black workers; to push out on the important questions of organizing unions in the south, fighting for collective bargain rights, fighting for the human right of workers to have a say for workplace. Living wages. As the North Carolina Raise Up Campaign has representing workers of why we’ve got to have a fifteen-dollar minimum wage. It’s just very challenging out there for workers. Even for most students coming out of college, law school, they are having problems finding jobs. We need a public service jobs program, pretty much like we had in the 1960s and 70s when we were addressing the large numbers of unemployment in the black community after the riots.
I know that I had an opportunity to work in the Cedar program comprehensive employment-training program and many programs that provided jobs to the unemployed youth. We need that kind of effort today led by black workers. I think that’s reason enough for Black Workers for Justice to revitalize its message and push out harder and reach out to young people. Pretty much like what we’re doing for Hip Hop for Justice. Reaching out to the young folks as we talked about the need for younger leaders to engage on the political question. There are so many opportunities and so many struggles going on around voting rights. Again, the reason that these right to work laws exist here in the South is because of Jim Crow apartheid in the South of denying a large portion of the working class population, black people the right to vote. Therefore, it was easy to pass all these right to work laws that made it very difficult to organize unions here in the South. The importance of why Black Workers for Justice is even more important today with all the attacks going on, the war on the working class, the war going on in black communities, we have to renew our energy, our effort, redouble our effort to engage on a political level. I don’t mean just voting. Some people keep forgetting that strikes, workplace actions, petitions, lobbying, lawsuits, demonstrations are all part of what we call political action. So that’s what our role is, is to better organize black working class people in their workplaces and in their
communities to engage in fighting for human rights using all those means of political action and more.

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LAUGHINGHOUSE: Sledgelock was a very important struggle for black workers for justice. We had begun organizing a workplace committee inside our Black Workers for Justice related work there. This company worked the workers, many workers got sick, they left and went to Mexico, uh you know, it was a runaway shop, trying to make more money by leaving North Carolina. It left the community contaminated. It also left workers ill. This was a very important effort to show the community why they too must help organize unions in the South so workers can better fight against these positions and companies leaving our communities in this kind of shape. Very important struggle.

MONTAÑO: Where exactly was Schlage Lock?

LAUGHINGHOUSE: Schlage Lock is in Rocky Mountain, NC it was there for many years. As we know, lots of manufacturing school going down there in the eastern part of the North Carolina its an area often overlooked by unions. This is why black workers for justice took the initiative to begin organizing what we call workplace committees. Even if we don’t win at least were educating the community and the workers about the importance of unions about the importance of having workers’ power in the communities to take on some of these companies there to super exploit and leave.
MONTAÑO: And when did you become involved with that?

LAUGHINGHOUSE: I was involved with Black Workers for Justice since 1981. I have been a member of Black Workers of Justice since 1981. I have been a co-founder of the organization and have been engaged ever since.

It’s an organizational question. Our organizations decided that we needed to mobilize our members around the region so as long as the campaign began to develop we began to mobilize. Marches, political education. I used to be the co editor of justice speaks so we’d write articles, editorials, try to go speak in churches, community groups.

In terms of Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow effort we thought it represented a big opening and opportunity particularly not only for black people but we thought it represented a big opportunity for workers for labor, for union organizing but at the same time we knew that just supporting democrats, particularly in North Carolina or South wouldn’t be the solution in advancing a labor program as many of us know we’ve had many democrats, governors, elected officials, and many in legislature but yet we have not been able to advance a very strong workers’ rights bill or workers’ rights effort to repeal section 95-98 which denies collective bargaining to public service workers’ unions. We have not been able to get many of these Democrats to support these workers despite Democratic governors, leaders, on the statewide level, local level, city level. So we knew what we had to develop our own platform and fight for it ourselves. Labor
today is beginning to wake up. And this is something we’ve been saying forever. We need to have an independent political platform. So Black Workers for Justice saw this as an opportunity for big education in the black community. So we had an assembly, another membership assembly, but we invited community leaders too.

And so when Jesse Jackson and his sons came here to work, in North Carolina, to motivate people to work

But we were trying to use it as an opportunity to educated people why a workers bill of rights, matter of fact we had our own literature advocating Jesse Jackson’s bill of rights. In fact, Jesse had a lot of Coalition of Native Americans, white workers, black workers, Latinos, farmers. It was a populist kind of movement. It was a very exciting opportunity for us to build. Because we didn’t know where Jesse Jackson was gonna go.

We weren’t sure if he was going to try to continue to push as an independent dynamic inside the democratic on the platform or if he was just gonna barter away the political strength the Rainbow Coalition represented. But we knew one thing. That this was an opportunity to build the strength and power to alter the balance of power right here in North Carolina which we were able to do. Which I told you we were able to do during that period. We ran some of our own members for office.
Down in Freemont in Rocky Mount the black majority in the city of Rocky Mount did not just come out of nowhere. I know that Black Workers for Justice through the work I’ve been doing over the years. I used to work down there during...with the census working with some of the leaders down there, Sue Perry and a host of other leaders down there. Andre knight and Ruben Blackwell, these are all friends of mine. They know me well. I travel a bit. And don’t forget this is after work. People say man you don’t get paid to do this full time, I say nope. They say man, you must be a pretty healthy energetic guy to do this work.

Passion drives you to do many things [chuckle]. And commitment and seeing the importance of things drives you to do many things. It has driven Black Workers for Justice to take this question up of building independent political action. We did it recently. Also, not during the Rainbow Campaign but recently in 2012 when the National Democratic Convention was held in Charlotte, NC.

One guy said wow, you are having demonstrations every week leading up to the national convention in 2012. We said, yes because we know we gotta to push these Dixiecrats and moderate Democrats on labor rights. We were doing that in front of city of Charlotte because we were organized in the city of Charlotte and we were trying to make them give us the right to meet and confer, the right to payroll deduction and more power for the workers there. As you already know, we won that fight.
They gave us meet and confer. They gave us more rights. They gave us pay roll deduction because we were embarrassing them during the National Democratic Convention. The highlight was the founding of the Southern Workers Assembly at the national convention,

We had Southern workers from at least eight Southern states present. These were similar opportunities that the Rainbow Jackson coalition created. It created an opportunity for us to advance our program of organizing the South. Turning business unions into social justice unions. To take on other issues of importance in our communities that impact working people and the lessons we drew out of the Rainbow Coalition. We applied them to the Southern Workers Assembly. To this day the Southern Workers Assembly has been convening. I was in one of their meetings two weeks ago we had fast food workers there, we had teachers there. Pulling workers together to build a social justice agenda to make sure we have good schools, we have good jobs, that make sure fast workers have a high minimum wage. And we think fifteen dollars. Which is still moving forward. Matter of fact they have a meeting tomorrow. Southern Workers Assembly. We also wanna begin to do this with the great professors that we have on some of these campuses. They can play a key role in the Southern Workers Assembly. Particularly education. We need to educate workers. We will never be able to win this fight without some broad political education. And again, that was the impetus and the reason for the Black
Workers for Justice campaign during the Rainbow Coalition.

MONTAÑO: So following the Rainbow Coalition, that’s when Black Workers for Justice started to expand in the Southern states.

LAUGHINGHOUSE: No, we have always made attempts to expand. Sometimes it has been a question of resources. We are not one of those organizations that gets millions of dollars like the NAACP to campaign.

It is easy to fund Moral Monday than something as sharp as organizing unions. I do not think everyday people in church are going to throw money to organize unions. I think it’s a tougher task.

MONTAÑO: So let’s talk about the Justice Speaks and its success. Did you find it successful in educating?

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LAUGHINGHOUSE: In fact, it was very successful and not only trying to bring the class-consciousness to everyday working people in our community and our workplaces. It was a way of uniting the many different struggles so people could see that we were part of broader working class struggle, not just the black community. Justice Speaks played a central role in building political campaigns such as the King holiday campaign. Such as the campaign for the Justice Hamlet workers. The
imperial food fire in Hamlet, North Carolina. Many important in knowing the different struggles because it reported on the many struggles. They would see from reading it and distributing it the importance of their struggle and they weren’t the only ones out here fighting these struggles = there were lots of others. But also, it did a lot of political education. No one can say that what’s going on right now in the Ukraine is not impacting the U.S. economy. Economics has a lot to do- no one can not say that the war in Iraq and Afghanistan is not impacting working people or dealing with day to day or why they gotta cut the budget for human needs and give it to the military. So very important role that the Justice Speaks played. Today, our newspaper is by email = we have a digital newspaper, but we really need to get back to another newsprint edition. But as I said before, the question of resources has been very challenging.

MONTAÑO: Did Black Workers for Justice ever tap into putting on health clinics for people, for working people?

LAUGHINGHOUSE: We saw that as very important. When we found out that many workers were without health plans or health insurance and they were working in some of the most dangerous, unhealthy, working environments, we know good and well that’s one of the roles that we had to play. I want to thank the students from Duke and Central and many of the universities that helped with these clinics. Steve Bater the international representative for our organization
MONTAÑO: So what kind of things do these health clinics do?

LAUGHINGHOUSE: Health screenings regarding diabetes, respiratory, hypertension. But often times we ran into situations where workers were living in communities where the water was contaminated by the industry there. Good case in point was in the community of Shiloh, which is near Morrisville here in Wake County. Coppers was using PCP to treat laminated wood. They dumped the PCP, which is toxic, into the ground and into the pod. It seeped into the well water and the workers were drinking it. It’s still being cleaned up. But if it wasn’t for Black Workers for Justice organizing the community and bring unions. We have people Unions have a role to play in the broader community. This is the connection that the Justice Speaks

They don’t need waste sludge coming out of the sewers, spread on the land. It seeps into the well water. This is the importance of health clinics and Justice Speaks that promotes the health clinics.

The women’s commission is a very important part of our organization. It should be a very important part of every organization. I think NAACP chapters need women commissions. The oppression that women suffer. Patriarchy, chauvinism, the history of the oppression of women is very important. As we move into the rest of
the international working women’s month, all of us should participating and learning more about the oppression of women. Our women’s commission plays a very important role. It analyzes the community involvement we’re involved in from the perspective of working women. You know, you, I, many of us, males, despite our best effort, we can not appreciate the dimensions of women suppression and the role of patriarchy in this society, no more than our white brothers and sisters can appreciate, the history of white chauvinism and white supremacy and European chivalry and how it impacted African-Americans.

MONTAÑO: So how exactly did the women’s commission get started?

LAUGHINGHOUSE: The women. The women. Our very strong leaders and we’re thankful for all our women leaders in our organization. They saw a need for this as they struggle with the males in our organization on various questions and campaigns. Not that we have some of the most sexist men. I’m pretty sure the women’s commission is always dealing with sexism and chauvinism and sometimes its very incorrect of the various male leaders and they struggle hard and they have their own program. They have their own meetings. They come with proposals and recommendations to the broader BFWJ organization.
MONTAÑO: Did Black Workers for Justice always work directly with unions?

LAUGHINGHOUSE: Let me state very clearly that many of the leaders of Black Workers for Justice, that founded Black Workers for Justice have always been union leaders. I started in New York with the electrical workers when I was eighteen. I worked with the Workers Defense League, which was led by A. Philip Randolph. I had chance to know those guys. I didn’t really understand their importance in history as a teenager but they did a pretty good job, I think making sure I understood the importance of social justice unionism and also people like Jim Horton fighting to get us justice. Again, these were some of the teachers that I had as a young man growing. I’m quite sure that Salla Dean, I know he has belonged to unions. I came up through the ranks. Later on, worked as a union organizer for various unions. But this has always been a part of our thinking. Southern leaders have always tried to deny these work rights that have denied us the strength to build strong unions. This is something we need in our region.

MONTAÑO: Can we talk Black Workers for Justice role in creating the North Carolina Public Service Workers Association?
LAUGHINGHOUSE: Okay. Now there’s a difference in the North Carolina Workers Association and North Carolina Workers Union. Some people don’t understand that the North Carolina Workers Association was the predecessor. Way back in 1983, it was my charge in Black Workers for Justice to get a job working for the city of Durham at that time. As one of the key leaders organizing the public sector, my job was to recruit others to help build and revitalize Durham City Workers Union way back in 1983 to about ’87, ’88. We knew we had to do this not workplace-to-workplace, but on a broader scale. So we began organizing workplace committees in Rocky Mount. Chapel Hill. Raleigh. Asheville. Charlotte. And this became the public service workers organization which was a workplace based organization and maybe one union, the Durham city workers union, which I was chief steward of and sat on the board of and Black Workers for Justice was able to use the Southern solidarity tour, the Northeast tour and the Midwest tour to attract international unions to come South. They ended up hiring me. That was somewhere around 1991 I guess and I began doing broader organizing.

Legislative chambers. I know vie been one of the folks who’s been arrested for three charges but the one that I was convicted on was criminal trespass and you cane trespass in a public space. The legislative oiling, we weren’t in the chambers, we were outside the chambers, we weren’t disreupitnganything. I think this civil disobedience action was in the spirit of the kind of
protest that Dr. King exercised back in the sixties where he went inside to get served good on a counter or where he stood up for his human right. We have a human right to have our voices heard when we disagree with government. And for us just going inside the lobby of the chambers. Singing praying, and challenging chanting, I don’t think it’s anymore than the basic human right to exercise and our right to protest. That’s an internationally recognized right. A democratic right. To free speech and protest. We did not disrupt anything inside the chambers. They were able to conduct the business of the state legislature. Unlike the tea party we did not go inside the chambers and throw tea bags to the floor and hit anybody. But yeah we were arrested for exercising our right to protest. There were actual trials still going on. Some have been convicted some have been acquitted. But they need to drop all the charges as we exercised our basic right to protest.

Alliance of Southern workers and unions that we drop all charges against the folks who ran inside exercising their right to protest.

MONTAÑO: Was there any violence that occurred

LAUGHINGHOUSE: No violence at all. No violence, no disruption. I think that all the people were arrested nearly, over 940 of them were arrested primarily because they had the integrity and the had the courage to challenge the direction of the
present leasers who were pushing this extreme right wing agenda just by virtue of challenging them. These folks are used to power; they’re very wealthy people like Art Pope the director of budget. He’s a multi millionaire. You gotta ask yourself, he has to only be paid one dollar a year, there's a political agenda. We’re challenging the political direction. They don’t like us trying to challenge the political direction. They don’t like us trying to build the base to alter the balance of power they have verses what the people have who have been arrested though. They’re very courageous people. I’m honored to be in the mix, be one of the 940 people who are challenging. I think we need more of this determined action as we push ahead. I don’t think they understand...or I think the right wing is beginning to understand that we are not going to take one step back as we push ahead. I know that the governor and some of his allies are reconsidering their position on the teachers, originally they gave them no, they didn’t give any concession to the teachers in terms of their agenda this last legislative agenda, but now there visiting it because of all the political pressure. I think there revisiting of the Medicaid Medicare issue in terms of resources sends people who are still pushing and I think we gotta push harder. I think we have to push many of the young leaders. Also, many of working class younger, need to be more engaged.
MONTAÑO: And this is not just a North Carolina issue, we have seen on a national level the right wing, the Supreme Court siding to interfere the 1960s legislation. What role does Black Workers for Justice or these movements in general in response to that?

LAUGHINGHOUSE: Well I wanna just state that firstly we consider ourselves an intricate part of the Moral Monday movement and the eight years partner in the historic thousand on Jones street. We’re always present; we’re always trying to share our thinking. This moral Monday movement is starting to pour out. South Carolina is trying to develop a movement. I think a similar type movement is developing in Georgia. I think we need to broaden out this national response like in the 1960s were the Birmingham and thee sit ins and Rosa Parks on the bus. The sit ins at the counters initiated by SNCC bus rides, freedom rides. We need to make sure this movement broadens out. Through the Southern Assembly. Our job has to make sure there’s a worker’s bill of rights. A worker’s agenda. A movement inside this broader movement to challenge right to work laws right in the South. All of these young folks coming out of school cant find jobs. Many jobs without health care, without any pension, these are the jobs that some of our most talented young folks are finding. The wealthy are able to make billions of dollars. Working folks suffer. And our young folks don’t have a future unless they find ways to become more engaged in this particular movement. And certainly Black Workers for justice will
try to engage more unions, more worker organizations and it's a very important fight to take on this right wing effort to push to this extreme agenda that continues to take way from basic rights of working people.

MONTAÑO: Let's hone in on some of those workers rights. What do you see as being a threat to workers rights right now.

LAUGHINGHOUSE: I know one thing all workers are fighting for. Better wages. Living wages for those that are fast food workers. The North Carolina Raise Up campaign organizing fast food workers. They're fighting for fifteen dollars an hour minimum wage. As you see its had an impact with Obama passing an executive order that has lifted federal contract employees’ minimum wage but for this task to become a broader movement. Taft-Hartley, a law that was passed in the 1940s. We have to repeal that law. It weakens workers’ ability to have dignity in the workplace. Make sure that they have some basic rights in the workplace to make sure they have their fair share of collective bargaining rights for public service workers has to become an integral part of this workers rights. Right of due process, right to a witness, right to a testimony before they get terminated from a job. I think these all need to part of the bill of rights that we want to make as part of this campaign.

[End of Transcript]