



# JOBS WITH JUSTICE OF EAST TENNESSEE

## Annual Review of Coalition Activities

May 12, 2008

The last twelve months have been busy ones for the JWJ coalition in East Tennessee. We have begun several important projects, and we have continued to work with our partners in support of workers' rights, union organizing campaigns, and issues of economic justice in our area. What follows here is a review of these activities and a look ahead at the challenges we will face in the next year.

The coalition meets the first Thursday of each month at 6 p.m. at the UNITE HERE union hall, 1124 N. Broadway. JWJET's office is located in the UNITE HERE building. The coalition maintains a website: <http://www.jwjet.org>.

### JWJET COALITION MEMBERS

#### Labor Unions

CWA Local 33076 (Knoxville Newspaper Guild)  
CWA Local 3865 (United Campus Workers)  
Knoxville/Oak Ridge Central Labor Council  
SEIU Local 205  
UFCW Local 1995  
UNITE HERE Southern Regional Joint Board  
UNITE HERE Local 906  
USW Local 795

#### Faith Communities

Church of the Savior (UCC)  
Episcopal Peace Fellowship (St. James Episcopal Church)

Glenmary Commission on Justice  
Interfaith Worker Justice of East Tennessee  
Knoxville Ministerial Association  
Grassroots Social Justice Organizations  
Highlander Education and Research Center  
Progressive Student Alliance (University of Tennessee)  
Tennesseans for Fair Taxation

The coalition also includes twenty-five dues-paying individual members.

## CAMPAIGNS AND PROJECTS

1. PICKETING CAMPAIGN AGAINST BURGER KING (in support of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers). We made a local B.K. outlet the focus of our participation in the Global Justice Day of Action on Jan. 26. Fifty-five people carried signs and distributed leaflets at the B.K. restaurant near the JWJ office on N. Broadway. We picket a different local B.K. outlet during the lunch hour on one Saturday each month, and we will continue our picketing until B.K. joins the agreement CIW reached last year with Taco Bell and McDonalds. We have distributed hundreds of leaflets and talked with dozens of B.K. customers while on the picket line. The Knoxville/Oak Ridge Central Labor Council proposed that we distribute letters to union retirees to sign and turn in to Burger King stores protesting their socially irresponsible policies and promising to stay away until the corporation changes those policies. We provided the letters, and owners of local B.K. outlets are now hearing from union retirees.

2. SUPPORT FOR THE UFCW'S ORGANIZING CAMPAIGN IN TARHEEL, N.C. JWJET members checked local supermarkets for products from Smithfield Foods Tar Heel, N. C. plant and reported the results to the national campaign. We plan to meet with district managers of Knoxville supermarkets that are selling products from Tar Heel. Local UFCW reps have agreed to join us in meeting with Kroger officials.

3. SUPPORT FOR THE INDIAN GUEST WORKERS' PILGRIMAGE TO WASHINGTON, D.C. JWJET actively supported the Indian guest workers who escaped from virtual slavery at the hands of a defense contractor with workplaces in Mississippi and Texas. With the assistance of the New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice, 70 members of the Alliance of Guestworkers for Dignity traveled from New Orleans to Washington in order to testify before Congress regarding the proposed expansion of the H2B guestworker visa program. The workers visited civil rights shrines along the way. After making the startling discovery that their pilgrimage had been targeted by ICE for coordinated surveillance along the route of their journey from New Orleans, the workers redoubled their commitment to the endeavor, but also decided that they should seek sanctuary and accompaniment. They successfully reached out to various allies in the human rights and labor rights communities, and to progressive African-American clergy. JWJET responded to their call by sending two JWJET members who spent March 25-26 with the Indian guest workers, participating in their press conference and march

through downtown Atlanta and then accompanying them as observers as they traveled through rural Georgia and North Carolina to Greensboro.

#### 4. PARTICIPATION IN REGIONAL AND NATIONAL WORKERS' RIGHTS

CAMPAIGNS. JWJET is a member and has been directly represented in regional and national worker's rights campaigns. (1) Religious Leaders for Coalfield Justice (RLCJ) supported approximately 670 registered nurse members of the Kentucky Nurses Association and West Virginia Nurses Association (both state Affiliates of the United American Nurses national union) began an unfair labor practices (ULP) strike on October 1, against Appalachian Regional Healthcare (ARH), a not-for-profit health care system with hospitals, clinics, home health and other health services in 21 counties in eastern Kentucky and southern West Virginia. The strike led to a new contract and RLCJ has been monitoring the results with follow-up interviews of nurses. JWJET took responsibility for interviews in Middlesboro, KY. (2) Religious Leaders for Justice at Comcast is supporting union organizing efforts at Comcast (the largest cable company in the U.S.--with some 87,000 employees in 40 states and D.C.) by the Communications Workers of America and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. JWJET will be represented on May 14 at the Comcast shareholders meeting to confront the corporation for its union avoidance activities and unfair labor practices.

#### 5. SUPPORT FOR UNITED CAMPUS WORKERS' ORGANIZING EFFORTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE.

JWJ members have been regular participants in UCW/CWA leafleting actions during the past year. We joined with CWA organizers from around the SE region in March in the UCW's organizing "blitz" on the UT campus. JWJ members also participated in this year's UCW lobby day at the state legislature in Nashville on March 18. We are proud to be a part of the UCW's organizing campaign that has increased union membership from about 450 members a year ago to over 600 members today.

6. KNOXVILLE NEWSPAPER GUILD. The contract between the Knoxville News Sentinel and its editorial workers expired in Nov., 2005. Since that time the company has refused to negotiate a new contract, preferring instead to deliver "take it or leave it" ultimata, and insisting, among other things, that all raises be in the form of merit pay. Workers at the News Sentinel have not had a pay raise since Nov., 2004, during which time there has been 8% inflation. JWJ members joined Newspaper Guild picket lines in 2006. During the past year we have helped gather names on petitions, urging the company to enter real negotiations with its employees. We stand ready to return to the picket line if the union decides to step up its pressure on the News Sentinel.

7. WORKER CENTER PROJECT. Early in 2007 JWJET established a task force to study the feasibility of starting a worker center in Knoxville. What we envision is a community-based institution that would provide services and support to low-wage workers in East Tennessee. The worker center would be a place for low-wage workers to come together, define the problems they face in the workplace and develop strategies for addressing those problems. During the past year the task force has been gathering and

analyzing information about the low wage sector of the East Tennessee economy. Task force members have visited a worker center in North Carolina and have participated in workshops sponsored by JWJ, Interfaith Worker Justice, and the Center for Community Change. We have begun to work with the CEDNET Latino Task Force, which has expressed interest in creating a worker center in Knoxville. The work of the task force has been slowed somewhat by the urgent demands of another JWJET project, the Rapid Response Coalition, discussed below.

8. RAPID RESPONSE COALITION. During the past three years raids conducted by agents of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) on workplaces with a high percentage of immigrant workers have caused widespread fear and chaos among low-wage immigrant workers and their families. It is clear that the disruption and suffering caused by ICE raids can be reduced when communities prepare ahead of time to deal with the consequences of such raids. Thus in Nov. of 2007 JWJET, in partnership with the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC), began to build a Rapid Response Coalition (RRC) that would provide a coordinated and effective community response to raids in our area. More than 100 local residents expressed interest in participating in RRC and many community organizations have joined in the work of the committees that are developing aspects of an effective response. We have set up a communications system that can quickly mobilize members of the coalition. When RRC was still very much under construction we began to receive calls for help from immigrant workers who were suffering from problems of wage theft and intimidation. Our response to these emergencies has given us valuable practical guidance as we work to complete the organization of RRC. When a large-scale ICE raid occurred on April 16 at the Pilgrim's Pride poultry plants in Chattanooga members of RRC traveled to Chattanooga and were on the scene within hours. They joined grassroots groups in Chattanooga in organizing legal and material assistance to some 150 immigrant workers and their families.

9. PROGRESSIVE STUDENT ALLIANCE. PSA has long been an advocate for UT employees, and especially for the 1,500 workers there who make less than a living wage. Last fall PSA revitalized a faltering living wage campaign by developing a new tactic that caught UT administrators by surprise. As Board of Trustees members approached the building on the Ag campus where the fall Board meeting was to take place, they were accosted by students who gave them information on the living wage and the plight of low-wage employees. Some trustees were shocked by that information and raised questions in the board meeting about the living wage. PSA is now challenging the efforts of the UT administration to smother the issue by substituting a "market study" for the living wage study produced by the UT Faculty Senate. JWJET supplied PSA with a letter of support addressed to the Board of Trustees. We also provided financial assistance to PSA which helped make it possible for nine PSA members to attend the national meeting of United Students Against Sweat Shops (USAS) in Miami. JWJET has benefitted enormously from the energy and imagination that PSA members bring to the coalition, and from their commitment to stand up for the rights of workers at Knoxville's largest employer.

10. SUPPORT FOR UNITE HERE LOCAL 906'S SOLIDARITY DAY. JWJET members turned out on April 12 to enjoy a picnic and fellowship at the first annual

"Solidarity Day" sponsored by UNITE HERE Local 906. Along with fun and food, the gathering had a serious purpose, as union members sponsored an event that stressed the importance of solidarity among working people in the face of greedy corporations and a downturning economy. JWJ set up an information table and expressed the hope that we can make a spring Solidarity Day into an annual event.

11. REQUEST FROM UNITED STEELWORKERS LOCAL 15120 AT THE PILGRIM'S PRIDE PLANTS IN CHATTANOOGA. Staff members of the United Steelworkers (USW) contacted JWJET in February to request our help in its efforts to strengthen its local at the three Pilgrims' Pride plants in Chattanooga. They explained that the union was about to launch an internal organizing drive in anticipation of contract negotiations later in the year. They also said that a key feature of the drive would be reaching out to the Latino workers who had come to work at Pilgrim's Pride in large numbers but who had not yet been effectively recruited into the union or integrated into the local's leadership. In March, several members of JWJET and veterans of the 2005-06 Koch Food campaign met with a USW organizer and the USW rep who services Local 15120. We shared lessons that we had taken from the Koch Food organizing campaign in 2005-06, we told about our Rapid Response Coalition, and we offered to help with educational events in Chattanooga for both native-born and immigrant workers. We were able to put the union in touch right away with several immigrant-friendly (and union-friendly) pastors and grassroots organizations in Chattanooga who agreed to provide community support for the union effort. Meanwhile hopeful plans were in the works for film screenings, know-your-rights presentations, etc.. Then on the morning of April 16, ICE agents stormed the Pilgrim's Pride plants. In a moment, the lives of 150 immigrant workers and their families were thrown into chaos, and of course the immediate plans of the union and allied supporters were blown up as well. Despite much undeniable frustration over this sequence of events, it is clear that our initial efforts to assist Local 15120 contributed to an improved grassroots response in the aftermath of the raid. The USW is now revising its plan in light of the new situation. JWJET is an active part of the on-going raids response in Chattanooga. We are maintaining contact with the union, with community groups on the scene, and with others around the state and the country who are working to build aggressive responses to ICE enforcement in the low-wage workplace. Two of our members were invited to speak about our work in Chattanooga on a raids panel at the recent JWJ Conference in Providence in early May.

12. WORKERS' MEMORIAL SERVICE. JWJET joined with the Knoxville/Oak Ridge Central Labor Council and the Knoxville chapter of Interfaith Worker Justice in organizing and producing the annual Workers' Memorial Service, held at the Labor Temple on Morgan St. A dozen local religious leaders participated in the service, which remembered each of the workers who died on the job in Tennessee during the year.

13. NEW JWJET OFFICE AT UNITE HERE. JWJET members can testify to what a wonderful community asset Knoxville has in UNITE HERE's union hall on N. Broadway. JWJ monthly meetings have always been held there and our occasional larger meetings and suppers have used UNITE'S kitchen and assembly room. When it became clear that JWJET's Rapid Response Coalition required an office that could serve as a

"command center" to coordinate a community response to ICE raids in our area, UNITE HERE generously offered us office space. The new JWJET office at 1124 N. Broadway will support all the projects described in this newsletter.

14. COMMUNICATIONS: LABOR NEWS DESK AND THE JWJET WEBSITE. JWJ endeavors to use the public media to promote a pro-labor perspective on public interest issues. In the summer of 2007 JWJET partnered with UNITE HERE and the Memphis-based Midsouth Interfaith Network for Economic Justice to establish a "Labor Justice News Desk" at the newly formed Tennessee Public News Service (PNS). We supply information on local labor issues to PNS professional journalists who then fashion news stories and distribute them to radio stations across the state. We are currently evaluating whether to renew our contract with PNS in light of the lack of local radio stations that carry any news at all. JWJET maintains a website which is regularly updated by webmaster Walter Davis. Visit it at <http://www.jwjet.org>