

Black and Brown: The United Colors of Low-Wage Workers

By Stephen Lerner

Conventional wisdom holds that tensions between Black and Latino workers are on the rise as the two ethnic groups compete for the same low-wage service sector jobs in many of our nation's big cities. But recent successful efforts by both groups of workers, to form unions and organize for pay increase and health insurance, show that workers and leaders from both communities are crossing racial lines to help improve the very jobs that they are supposed to be fighting over.

In high-profile strikes this year by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) janitors in Houston and Miami, Black and “brown” national leaders united to support a largely immigrant workforce. Dozens of African American leaders—many of them veterans of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and leaders in the ongoing struggle against racism and discrimination, such as Rev. James M. Lawson and Charles Steele, Jr.—lent their support to help mostly Latino workers win better jobs, using many of the same non-violent, civil disobedience tactics that helped spur the civil rights movement.

In cities like Los Angeles and Boston, labor leaders like Mike Garcia and Rocio Saenz, are committing their union's resources to the SEIU janitor strike to help improve the jobs of the (largely Black) security officers who work in their buildings—for many of the same employers and corporate real estate firms.

As a result of these efforts at “black-brown unity,” more than 20,000 security officers and janitors have secured the civil right to form a union, or have won a new union contract in the last few months alone.

Poverty Wages: The Real “Uniter”

The union victories so far show that the need for better jobs crosses racial lines. Also, workers are growing wise to the fact that the real culprits

behind the bleak economic outlook are not other ethnic groups, but the large corporations that are driving our nation's service economy.

A lot of attention is given to the fact that the service sector currently drives the overall American economy, but what is often ignored is the fact that the real estate sector drives the service economy. The entities that own, control, and invest in office buildings and shopping malls—companies like Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan Chase—either directly or indirectly control the jobs of more than nine million service workers (janitors, security officers, landscapers) at their commercial properties.

The real estate industry boasts of developing our cities and creating jobs for our communities. But in reality, the industry's reliance on poverty-wages is actually undermining our inner cities and keeping African American and Latino workers stuck in dead-end jobs.

Corporate Policies That Undermine Communities

In Los Angeles County, thousands of commercial office buildings are protected by a private security workforce that is more than 65 percent African American and nearly 35 percent Latino. Most security officers live in South Los Angeles, where unemployment is three times higher than in other parts of the county, and 37 percent of the community lives in poverty.

As manufacturing jobs rapidly disappear from



the area, private security offers one of the few employment opportunities to the men and women of South Los Angeles, where a fulltime worker typically earns at or slightly above minimum wage, and nearly half the adults and a third of the children do not have adequate access to affordable healthcare.

In the last 20 years, corporate landlords have drained more than two billion out of the South Los Angeles economy by stripping middle-class janitorial jobs from African American workers and replacing them with non-union, poverty-wage jobs. It has taken years of organizing to regain the unions in these jobs, and to win higher wages and health insurance.

Today, if the city's corporate landlords would agree to pay security officers the same wages and benefits as the janitors who work in their commer-

cial office buildings, it could bring an estimated \$100 million more each year into South Los Angeles communities devastated by decades of discriminatory policies.

Redefining Urban Economics with Politics

People of color and recent immigrants are demonstrating a new brand of black-brown unity, as they try to lift themselves and each other out of dead-end jobs and into a future with dignity, respect, and promise. These are the workers who are at the center of the efforts in our nation's cities to transform the service sector from a one-way ticket to poverty, into a new pathway to the middle class. As these nascent coalitions gain strength, their next casualty may be the economic and political status quo that has been the greatest obstacle to prosperity for America's inner cities for far too long. ■

Photo:
Union workers await
vote outcome on con-
tract agreement.

© 2006 David Bacon

Stephen Lerner works with the Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) Justice for Janitors movement and is the director of SEIU's Property Services Division. He first began organizing over 25 years ago with the United Farm Workers of America, on the grape and lettuce boycott.

& the Race, Poverty Environment

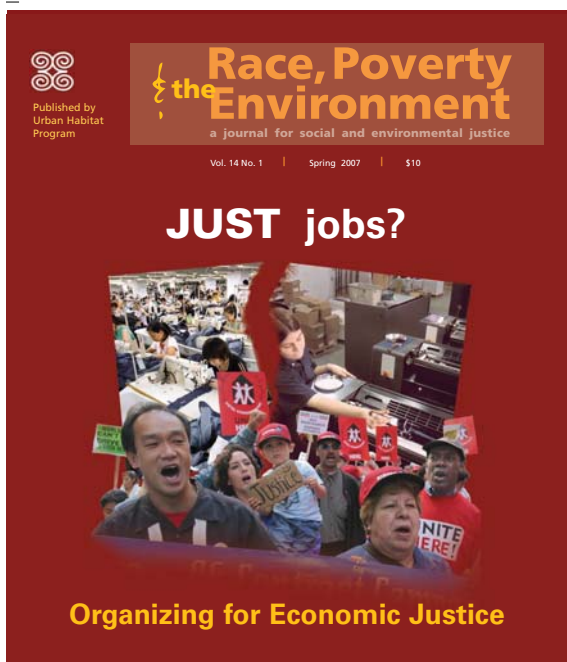
a journal for social and environmental justice



First published as a joint project of the Urban Habitat Program and the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, **RP&E** is now published twice annually by **Urban Habitat** and is dedicated to exploring the intersection of race, class, and environmental and social justice.

Don't miss any of our passionate, in-depth discussions of important social topics!

Support RP&E: subscribe today!



- Spring 1990 ▶ Earth Day
- Summer 1990 ▶ Cultural Diversity
- Winter 1991 ▶ Women of Color
- Spring 1991 ▶ Pesticides
- Summer 1991 ▶ Energy
- Winter 1992 ▶ The Summit
- Spring 1992 ▶ Asian/Pacific Islanders
- Summer 1992 ▶ Water
- Fall 1992 ▶ Native Nations in 1992
- Spring 1993 ▶ Urban Problems
- Summer 1993 ▶ Population and Immigration
- Fall 1993 ▶ Latinos and the Environment
- Spring 1994 ▶ Military Base Conversion
- Winter 1995 ▶ Environmental Justice and the Law
- Summer 1995 ▶ Nuclear Technology & Communities of Color
- Fall 1995 ▶ Social Justice and Transportation
- Spring 1996 ▶ Multicultural Environmental Education
- Fall 1996 ▶ The Border
- Winter 2000 ▶ A Place at the Table: Food & Environmental Justice
- Winter 2001 ▶ Reclaiming Land and Community: Brownfields & Environmental Justice
- Summer 2002 ▶ Fixin' to Stay: Anti-Displacement Policy Options & Community Response
- Summer 2003 ▶ Where Do We Go from Here? A Look at the Long Road to Environmental Justice
- Fall 2003 ▶ Governing from the Grassroots: EJ and Electoral Activism
- Summer 2004 ▶ Reclaiming our Resources: Imperialism and Environmental Justice
- Winter 2005 ▶ Burden of Proof: Using Research for Environmental Justice
- Winter 2006 ▶ Moving the Movement: Transportation Justice
- Summer 2006 ▶ Getting Ready for Change: Green Economics and Climate Justice

Use the form below or order online:
www.urbanhabitat.org/subscribe

Yes! I want an annual subscription to Race, Poverty & the Environment.
Sent free of charge to grassroots groups upon request.

\$20 (Individuals) \$40 (Institutions)

Yes! I want to support the advancement of social, economic,
and environmental justice in the Bay Area and beyond.

I want to support Urban Habitat with a tax-deductible donation of:

\$25 \$50 \$100 \$500 \$1,000 Other \$ _____

Name: _____

Organization: _____

Address: _____

State: _____ Zip: _____ Email: _____

A check is enclosed Please charge my Visa/MasterCard

Visa/MC Number: _____ Exp. Date: _____

(Please include the 3-4 digit card verification number found on the back of most credit cards.)

Signature: _____

Please make checks payable to Urban Habitat. Mail this form to 436 14th St., #1205, Oakland, CA 94612