

The Case for South Carolina

On a two-mile stretch of Highway 17 in Charleston, South Carolina, a quick count tallies at least nine auto title loan and cash advance operations. This speaks eloquently of the precarious economic position of many South Carolinians.

South Carolina has the seventh slowest rate of wage growth in the United States. This is partly because the state is one of only six that have no state minimum wage. It ranks 48th in job growth, ahead of only hurricane and FEMA-ravaged Mississippi and Louisiana.

The state also has the second highest rate of unemployment in the nation and lost 76,000 manufacturing and textile jobs between 1999 and 2004. Unsurprisingly, therefore, in key textile areas, such as Chester County, unemployment is greater than 10 percent.

"We all know about the high unemployment rates, low wages and lack of access to health care in South Carolina—all the things the Labor Party sees as priorities.

The concern is always, 'Can it happen?' If we have enough people to do the footwork, it's going to happen. Things are getting worse, and people are prepared to move."

**Willie Legette, Co-Chair
SC Organizing Committee**



Car title loans are known as "601" loans in South Carolina—lenders set loan amounts at \$601 or more to avoid the interest rate cap. The national median interest rate for title loans is 25 percent monthly or 300 percent annually with online rates as high as 651 percent APR.

More than 600,000 South Carolinians—over 14 percent of the entire state—are without health insurance, and this, of course, doesn't count the thousands who think they have insurance until they get sick. To compound this problem the state legislature and governor adopted a "reform" that will eliminate traditional Medicaid in the state and replace it with skimpy personal health care accounts. They did this without significant Democratic opposition.

Boastful of Low Wages?

Working people in South Carolina clearly are hurting, and neither major party is at all inclined to address their most pressing concerns. Politicians from both parties boast that the state's average wages are 20 percent below the national average. Republicans offer working people only corporate plunder and bigotry. Democrats abet them.

In just the last five years, Republicans have sought to divide South Carolina's workers over whether the Confederate battle flag should fly at the state capitol, whether prohibition of same-sex marriage and civil unions should be written into the state constitution, and whether evolution should be taught in the state's public schools. They have been able to make these into "hot button" issues because Democrats have not countered them with a political agenda that seeks to unite working people by speaking to their real, everyday needs.

"Minimally Adequate" Education

A recent case in point illustrates the two-party collusion in an especially striking way. Public education in South Carolina has been characterized by egregious disparities in funding between poor and affluent

school districts. As in many states, this pattern stems largely from reliance on local property taxes to fund education.

The result is that forty of the state's eighty-three districts are classified as "disadvantaged." The situation is so dire in many of these districts that several joined in a lawsuit against the state for not living up to its obligation to provide decent education to all South Carolina's children.

The state Supreme Court ruled this past December that South Carolina's only obligation is to provide a "minimally adequate" education. The remedy the court imposed is that K-3 education must be improved in the school districts that sued.

Not only does this imply that "minimally adequate" public education ends after third grade, but politicians are already blaming parents and talking about funding the necessary improvements by diverting money allocated for higher grades. This is an approach to public education that is reminiscent of the ruling planter class's hostility to public education for poor and working people in the 19th century.

Why South Carolina?

Conditions for working people are very bad in South Carolina, to be sure. But why, some might ask, would the Labor Party target a state that ranks last in union membership? "We're not just a trade union party. The response we're get-

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Case for South Carolina, continued from page one

ting from working people—union members and others—is really great. I suspected it would be. In South Carolina, neither party really addresses the set of basic human concerns—jobs, health, education, housing—in a systematic way,” says Adolph Reed, co-chair of the Free Higher Ed campaign.

Petitions and Party-Building

So the need and support are there. How do we go about building a party? Although the current organizing efforts got underway in December, the Labor Party has had a presence—via the leadership of the South Carolina AFL-CIO and the Free Higher Ed campaign—in South Carolina far longer. It is this support and initial organizing that provide a solid foundation from which to build.

The immediate hurdle is that state election law requires presentation of petitions signed by 10,000 validated registered voters in the state as a first step toward certification as a recognized political party.

Since December, organizers have focused signature gathering in three locations: Charleston, Columbia and Orangeburg. Via attendance at events such as the Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday rally at the state capitol in Columbia and ongoing door-to-door canvassing, booths at local flea markets and pitches to church congregations and union meetings, the South Carolina campaign is making its way steadily to the signature goal.

Getting the word out through both free and paid media has made the job of collecting signatures much easier. State organizing committee co-chairs Donna Dewitt and Willie Legette have been featured on nearly a dozen radio talk shows around the state, and Dewitt was interviewed on Pacifica nightly news.

The Orangeburg *Times and Democrat*, the largest paper in that section of the state, published a front-page article on our effort, which is available on the Labor Party’s website. The campaign also has run radio spots in Charleston (see the *On the Air box for the campaign radio spot*). Plans are underway to extend the signature gathering to Greenville, Rock Hill and Florence.

Union Support

The petition drive is a necessary step toward establishing a state party. It also feeds into the process of party building by giving the Labor Party a real presence in unions and communities and involving people in its work.

To that end, SC AFL-CIO president Donna Dewitt has made party building a major priority. “We believe the time has come to build a real political alternative capable of running credible campaigns and changing the terms of political debate in our state. We are convinced that it is time for South Carolina’s workers to begin to speak clearly with their own political voice,” says Dewitt.

Organizers secured invitations to make Labor Party presentations to nearly 30 local unions and central labor councils around the state in January alone. “Overall, the Labor Party has been very well received; union leadership has been open, supportive and very interested,” reports SC AFL-CIO staffer Linda Houck.

When USW Local 216 in Harleyville went on strike last August, the company permanently replaced all 138 workers. “When I met with the local’s president, David Stepp, he didn’t need a lot of convincing that workers in South Carolina need another choice,” said Mark Dudzic.

In Charleston, the Central Labor Council and the International Longshoremen’s Association Local 1422 (of Charleston Five fame), have been significant forces in advancing both the petition drive and related party-building by opening doors and providing contacts.

This Charleston experience underscores the practical importance of anchoring our efforts on a union base, even in a state with the lowest union density in the country. Activist unions like the Charleston ILA are forces in their local communities in ways that extend far beyond the ranks of their membership. And most of the key leadership that has

LABOR PARTY ON THE AIR

Do you think South Carolina needs good-paying jobs that stay in South Carolina?

Do you think the people of South Carolina need quality health care?

Do you think our students deserve a quality education and the chance to go to college?

If you said yes, then help us give South Carolina another choice at the ballot box. We need 10,000 registered voters to sign a petition to put the Labor Party on the ballot.

Volunteers will be collecting signatures and registering voters Saturday and Sunday at [locations listed here]. Help us give South Carolina another choice. For information or to volunteer, call 813-1943.

The Labor Party: Another Choice for South Carolina.



A Labor Party petitioner goes door to door gathering signatures in Charleston, South Carolina

emerged in the “community” part of the campaign are in fact former union members or members of union households. This is consistent with the Labor Party’s fundamental view that the labor movement must be key in building our party. Not only is the labor movement a vital source of institutional support for a Labor Party; it is where workers develop the ability and experience of defining and organizing around their interests as a class.

Resources Needed

None of this organizing can happen, of course, without significant resources. Funds are needed to hire regional coordinators, print campaign materials and pay petitioners to gather the necessary signatures.

USW Local 675 in southern California has made a sizable contribution and BMWED Pennsylvania Federation has been instrumental in raising significant funds.

A successful fundraiser attended by Donna Dewitt, Joslyn Williams (President of the Metropolitan Washington Council, AFL-CIO) and Nancy Wohlforth (OPEIU Secretary-Treasurer) was held in Washington, DC on January 9th.

CWA Local 1180 is hosting a fundraiser in New York on February 13, which will feature special guest Leonard Riley of ILA Local 1422 in Charleston,

SC. Nancy Wohlforth is organizing a San Francisco fundraiser on March 7 and house parties are in the works for Philadelphia, Chicago and a number of other cities (*see the How You Can Help box*).

Significant Impact

“I remain convinced that we can have a significant impact in South Carolina and send a message to the rest of the country that working people will respond to a political message that addresses their real needs and concerns even in a state where the two major parties work overtime to keep them divided,” says National Organizer Mark Dudzic.

Obviously, our ballot access and party-building efforts have been underway for far too little time to have had great impact. But with the support of the South Carolina AFL-CIO, our committed activists across the state and our growing presence on the radio and in print, we’ve begun to make a significant dent. While gathering signatures at a busy Charleston flea market, one of our petitioners approached a husband and wife. In response to our standard pitch, she immediately took the clipboard to sign the petition while her husband asked, “What’s the Labor Party?” She shot him a look of surprise and said, “Where have you been?” LP

HOW YOU CAN HELP THE SOUTH CAROLINA CAMPAIGN

INDIVIDUALS CAN:

- ★ Contribute! Make checks payable to **LABOR PARTY** (write South Carolina in the memo of your check). Send to PO Box 53177, Washington, DC 20009.
- ★ Email fundraise@thelaborparty.org about fundraisers in your area.
- ★ Spread the word! Encourage co-workers and friends to contribute.
- ★ Watch for updates online; sign up at www.thelaborparty.org.

UNIONS CAN:

- ★ Contribute to the Labor Party Political Fund (LPPF) - the 527 political committee of the Labor Party! Unions are encouraged to contribute funds from their soft-money PACs to the LPPF. Make checks payable to Labor Party Political Fund and mail to 1532 16th ST NW, Washington, DC 20036.
- ★ Continue to contribute general treasury money directly to the Labor Party to continue support of our non-electoral issue campaigns.

WE NEED THESE FUNDS NOW MORE THAN EVER!

Contributions to the Labor Party and the Labor Party Political Fund are not tax-deductible

In Memoriam

We are sad to report that Ernest Junis Rousselle, Sr. died January 27 after a brief illness at the age of 71. Ernie was long affiliated with the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union. He worked as an International Representative winning unfair labor charges against several chemical plants, including American Cyanamid and BASF and was responsible for organizing several non-union plants. Ernie ran for OCAW International office on Tony Mazzocchi’s reform slates in 1979 and 1981; he was elected Vice-President in 1979 and Secretary-Treasurer in 1991 where he continued to serve in leadership capacities both within the local and international until he retired in 1997. His support and leadership was crucial to the success of the Labor Party’s founding convention in 1996.

“Ernie is someone who has been dear to my heart for many years. As a Yankee fresh to Louisiana, he mentored me throughout the years I spent working for OCAW on the BASF lockout 1985-1990, and I learned a lot about character and principled leadership from Ernie. He also taught me labor law, and how Louisiana politics really worked. He was a close friend through to his retirement,” writes long-time activist and LP member Richard Miller.

“Ernie knew how to unify people and keep common objectives in mind through the most trying times. I marveled at how he worked through difficulties, and respected the best traditions of democratic unionism. He was a real problem solver with a razor-sharp mind. Ernie’s abilities and skillful leadership are chronicled in *Forging a Common Bond: Labor and Environmental Activism during the BASF Lockout* by Timothy Minchin.

Ernie’s passing is a loss, but his life is worthy of great celebration.”

THE PHRASE THAT PAYS

Chris Townsend

Did you know that the Democratic Party has a new slogan? Yes, it's true. And just in time for the New Year, as we begin to think about the critical 2006 elections. The latest slogan had its debut back in November. Congressional Democrats huddled for days as they wrangled over the new slogan and its hoped-for impact. It was thoroughly tested

*I'll suggest a slogan:
"Working people need a party that won't worry about what big business thinks and will start fixing the problems faced by working people. We need a Labor Party."*

by the consultants and their pricey focus groups, and then unveiled.

Here's what they came up with: "Together, America Can Do Better." Imagine that! A five minute chat with any working person would have provided the Democrats with this same startling concept—and that would have saved them all the time and trouble of having to pay a political consultant to dream this up for them.

The Democrats certainly spent a bundle on this new one,

because that's the way they do things here in Washington, DC. We have an entire "industry" of spin-men and spin-women who claim to sell the winning public relations formula to both political parties and their candidates. Most people see the end result of this process when television is saturated with mud-slinging ads just before an election.

Does it work? It seems to work for Congressional Republicans, because they never promise their working class supporters any relief from the attacks of big

business anyway. Workers who support Congressional Republicans get exactly what they vote for—unlimited selections from the "all pain, no gain" menu of life.

This formula doesn't work as well for Democrats, however, since a big majority of people who vote for them have the notion that once elected, they are supposed to actually do something about the problems we face. Like fixing our health care system. Or doing something about the catastrophic loss of

good jobs. Or figuring a way to get us out of Iraq before we are bankrupt. Or making it possible to organize a union once again, so working people can begin to earn more and work less.

The roll-out of the new slogan in mid-November was met by a flurry of activity here in Washington. For about a week after the announcement of the new slogan just about every leading Democrat in the country fit the catchy phrase into their speeches and press conferences, and that's about where it was last heard from. It all unrolled flawlessly: The Democrats hired an outfit to provide them with a new slogan. They did. They were paid handsomely.

It bombed. No one outside the beltway ever noticed. Thank goodness. And since it bombed, the consultants can make even more money by selling them another new slogan in the months to come. Stay tuned.

In the minds of far too many Congressional Democrats the goal is somehow to hypnotize people long enough to get their votes, and then once in office conveniently forget about making any of the tough changes that people need.



Broadcasting the slogan of the day will do nothing to energize working people for the coming elections. Coming up with "the phrase that pays" doesn't do anything to restore confidence that—if elected—the Congressional Democrats will produce tangible solutions to the massive problems pressing working people from all sides.

Working people know that the Republican Party speaks for the interests of corporate America. And working people are tired of the empty slogans and false promises offered by a Democratic Party that courts our vote and then ignores us.

And while we are on the subject of slogans, I'll suggest a slogan: "Working people need a party that won't worry about what big business thinks and will start fixing the problems faced by working people. We need a Labor Party." That won't fit on a bumper sticker, but it does give working people something to fight for.

Chris Townsend is Political Action Director of the United Electrical Workers Union (UE)

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NO COMMENT

"It should be no mystery that the United States, the only leading economic power without national health care, also leads the world in the per capita rate of diabetes."

New York Times editorial 2/5/06