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The Real Solution to Rochester's Poverty

by Bruce Popper

“Poverty is not an accident. Like slavery and apartheid, it is man-made and can be removed by the actions of human beings.”

- *Nelson Mandela*

Perhaps there is no place in which this insight is more true than Rochester, New York. As community leaders discuss yet another exhaustive study of our region's poverty, and how our city has become one of the poorest in America, a fundamental fact continues to be ignored: that much of Rochester's poverty has been quite deliberately engineered by employers and a hand full of law firms dedicated to crushing collective action by local workers.

Reverend Jesse Jackson, Sr.'s description of the poor to the 1988 Democratic National Convention is as true today as then:

“Most poor people are not lazy....Most poor people are not on welfare....They work hard every day. They raise other people's children. They clean the streets. They drive dangerous cabs. They change the beds you slept in in these hotels last night and can't get a union contract....They work in hospitals. They wipe the bodies of those who are sick with fever and pain. They empty their bedpans. They clean out their commodes. No job is beneath them.”

Most poor people are poor because the jobs they work do not pay enough to afford a decent standard of living. As Rochester's manufacturing jobs were replaced by health care, human service, higher education, hospitality, and retail jobs, decent pay disappeared for the masses. There are now tens of thousands of low paid home health aides, group home workers, janitors and maids, clerks and drivers who live within the City of Rochester.

When they ask for a raise, the answer is: “No. We pay market rate here. It's what everyone else is paying for this kind of work. It's fair.”

So, many poor workers are forced to work multiple jobs just to make ends meet, keeping them away from home and family for long stretches of time. God forbid they get

sick or that old car breaks down.

Unable to support families on these incomes, others give up, or turn to the streets, alcohol, or drugs.

A few talk with their coworkers in the hope that collective action will yield results that individual begging did not. They reach out to a union for help. Management finds out, and calls in its attorneys and consultants.

That's when things get really ugly.

The workers soon find out that the National Labor Relations Act's declaration of worker rights and the law's policy favoring collective bargaining have been completely eviscerated by decades of conservative court rulings and bad case law.

The employer's representatives know this sad fact. So they set about using every trick in the book to dissuade, discourage, and demoralize employees who are seeking to better themselves and protect their families.

One local human service agency, primarily funded by our tax dollars, spent over \$400,000 in 2012 to keep 300 of its low wage workers from organizing, according to documents filed with the U.S. Department of Labor. That cost is typical. But the typical employer feels that there is no price too high to keep the workers without a voice and powerless.

The defeat of the workers is designed to have a chilling effect, not only within a particular worksite but in the community as a whole.

In spite of the setbacks, over the past decade, there have been serious organizing efforts by literally dozens of groups of employees in the immediate Rochester area, representing at least 4,000 workers, mostly low wage and disproportionately people of color.

Their efforts were mostly unsuccessful, but they constitute a nearly continuous series of insurrections against poverty by groups of workers, a revolution that has gained no attention from the media and even less from the so-called liberal establishment nominally committed to reducing poverty.

Where workers have been successful, the results are dramatic. Service workers at the University of Rochester (UR) have negotiated labor contracts over the years that

provide for living wages, free and comprehensive family health insurance, a massive training and education fund, child care allowances, and a college scholarship fund. These workers used their union to break down historical barriers to promotion by minorities. They are predominantly people of color and City of Rochester residents. They are often among the financial pillars of their struggling neighborhoods. Their successive collective bargaining agreements have not prevented their employer from prospering financially and expanding into the region's largest employer.

Rather than invent a new program, fund a new study, or give a new handout, why don't we try empowering the very people, the poor, who we profess to want to help. To do so, we must first recognize that they have in fact been fighting back for years, and that there is a very real, totalitarian style repression alive and well in our town; a well defined and systematic counter insurgency, one which must be stopped if we are to find a real solution to poverty.

Without providing the vast majority of the poor, the working poor, with a decent standard of living, and that means a voice on their jobs, there is no solution to the education crisis, crime, and substandard housing plaguing Rochester.

Time has proven that we can't legislate poverty away. We can't eradicate it through philanthropy or charity.

Empowering working people worked once before. It built the American middle class.

It's time we tried it again.

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