

CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Break the cycle of poverty. Build community.



In 2007 the Catholic Campaign for Human Development funded a group called the United Workers Association (UWA). The primary goal of the organization was to

secure a living wage for the workers that clean Camden Yards and M&T Bank Stadium. Recently, on Thursday September 6th, 2007 they achieved that goal.

What a glorious Thursday evening it was. After three years of broken promises by the Maryland Stadium Authority and the owner of the Orioles, Peter Angelos, the United Workers Association had achieved their victory.

On September 6th outside a church off Light Street camera crews from local Baltimore news stations gathered to interview the United Workers. Telemundo, the Spanish news station, also covered the event. Wearing their staple bright yellow t-shirts which read “human rights”, the workers professed their excitement for everything they had achieved as a group. The event, a prayer vigil turned victory celebration, was quite a relief from what the United Workers had originally prepared to do if they did not achieve the living wage. Just three days previous, on Labor Day, they were planning to start a hunger strike that would last until living wages were secured. They decided, however, to postpone the start of the strike as a result of the Stadium Authority’s announcement that it would

meet on the on the afternoon of September 6th.

Surrounded by their fellow activists and supporters, the United Workers still had the prayer vigil, but the mood was different from what it may have been if they did not achieve their goal. While there were many victory speeches, the speakers did not forget to thank God for being with them in their struggle for human rights, realizing that humanity was created in God’s image. They also expressed a concern and prayers for those in Baltimore who still were hungry and homeless on the streets of Baltimore.



It has been a long fight for the UWA of Baltimore to achieve the living wage for those who work in the city’s stadiums. Their struggle has been one of patience and determination for their employer to recognize that the workers themselves and their lives are worth more than just the work they do. After all, Maryland has recognized the need for a living wage for those who work for large businesses residing in the state. However the stadium’s contract is with a firm that resides in Michigan. So they are not bound by law to pay the workers the region’s living wage of \$11.62 an hour.

Originally, in 2004, Peter Angelos committed to providing the workers with a living wage but did not provide specifics on how and when this would happen. In good faith, as requested, the UWA held off directing their concerns and frustration towards Angelos. The UWA deemed this “the season of hope.”

However, poverty wages were still in place at the end of the season. In the past two years they have taken their fight to politicians and people with authority as well as local fans during the games.

At a recent solidarity dinner the workers expressed the need for an ongoing commitment from their supporters and activists. This year they were victorious but their victory was bittersweet. While the Stadium Authority will pay a living wage, the workers will have to reapply for their jobs. The main concern that the United Workers have is that they could lose their jobs at the end of the season. They want to make sure that they receive seniority when applying for the living wage jobs, which will be available in January when the contract is up. Rose, a member of the UWA, expressed the need for workers to also have better working conditions. “It’s not just about getting a raise, it’s also about being treated fairly. Ultimately that’s what we are aiming for. We don’t want the workers to have to give up breaks, and we would also like the Stadium Authority to be clearer on their schedule. Sometimes they show up to work and are told to wait for an hour and then are sent home.”

With great humility they originally asked for \$9.50 which is less than the city’s living wage of \$11.62, realizing the need for the Stadium Authority to recognize their

human rights. One of the local activists who often attends events hosted by the United Workers also echoed his concerns about the significance of the work that they have done. “Sometimes when you get involved for your own personal reasons and convictions you forget the people that are affected. You

aren’t just in it to win. It is about people and justice.” They have shown, in their fight for the living wage, that the significance of their struggle is as important as the goal of achieving the living wage.

The United Workers Association of Baltimore follows a

community organizing model that requires organizations to be comprised of mostly low wage workers. They meet at local faith communities to flesh out ideas about how best to achieve a living wage and provide better working condition for workers. They train leaders, plan demonstrations and events to raise awareness, and put pressure on local officials who are the decision makers. The fact that the planning is done by the low wage workers themselves provides a very important dynamic of community organizing. The workers can bring to the table concerns and ideas which may elude those who do not work at the stadium. It also shows a true commitment to those who are most affected by the organization’s work.

Of course without funding and grants from organizations like CCHD, the United Workers could not survive and would not be able to hold events or pay those who work tirelessly to achieve their goals. They received \$35,000 from CCHD in 2007 and this is the 3rd year that they have been funded. And grants from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development are not easy to come by. For many groups it



requires a restructuring of their organization and a reevaluation of their goals.

Realizing the value of low-income participation has played a pivotal role in the United Workers Association receipt of a grant from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. While CCHD has some of the most stringent rules for granting money, there are practical reasons why these rules exist. For example CCHD values the participation of people who have a low income because it allows people to have a greater say in their own future and the future of their coworkers. CCHD also requires that the organizations which it funds work for institutional change. In this way CCHD realizes that the causes of poverty are often rooted in the structure of our society, businesses and government. Certainly the UWA's method of changing their situation has been grounded in these principles. They were able to get the Maryland Stadium

dignity that was bestowed on all of humanity by its Creator.

Written by CCHD intern Mike Escol



Authority to rethink how they paid their employees. They have sought solidarity among those who have little opportunity and power to change their working conditions alone and they have won a crucial victory for the workers of Baltimore's stadiums.

And yet they still have a long way to go. They still have to ensure that victory reaches those that it was intended to reach. The United Workers still need the prayers and support of the people around them who seek to work for others to recognize the