ACORN Workers Need a Union

The campaign so far...

Look for updates on our webpage: http://bari.iww.org/alerts/Acorn1.html
January 5, 2001

Dear Fellow ACORN Workers:

   I am following up with you concerning the discussions we had at YE/YB about changing some of our working conditions. Some of the concerns mentioned by workers include transit fare to and from the field and a guaranteed lunch break in our long 10-hour day.

   Some offices or individual workers may not have these concerns because they have taken the risk of standing alone or with a couple of co-workers and have asked for a lunch break. Or some head organizers may "allow" a lunch break. However, if we really want to improve things, without being at the mercy of our particular head organizer, we need to do what we tell our constituents to do every day: stand together and make it happen. Organize.

   I think we should form a union with the Industrial Workers of the World, a direct-action based, democratic, independent union. For more information on the IWW, please contact me or you can look on the web at iww.org.

   We need to figure out what improvements we want to see, and how we will go about doing this. We need a process by which we make decisions that is agreeable to us all.

   Forming a union means standing together and making our bosses do the things that we want them to do, and stopping them form doing the things we don't want them to do. If we want a say in our workplace, we need to stand together and form an organization that gives us power in numbers.

   So, if you still want to make improvements at ACORN, if you want to be guaranteed a break to eat your lunch every day, if you feel like there are other things you need in the workplace but feel that you need an organization of your co-workers to stand with you, then please contact me.

   There are already eight offices which have expressed interest in doing this. If you know of good contacts in any other offices, please let me know. But for now, let's keep a dialog going amongst those of us who have already met at the YE/YB meeting so that we can decide together how we can fill out our ranks.

   As a first step, please take the time to come up with a list of issues you would like to see our effort address. If you have any thoughts on the methods you would like to see us use to make decisions, please write them up also. I would like to hear back from everyone before February 1st. Whatever is sent to me by then, I will assemble into another mailing, include contact information for each person, and get it to everyone who replies.

   In solidarity,

   Gina Giazzoni

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The Beginning

December 2000: Gina Giazzoni had recently moved to Philadelphia and got a job working for ACORN. The hours were grueling, and workers had little say in how their job was to be done, but because she believed in the principles of ACORN, she stuck with it. Gina attended ACORN's annual Year End/Year Beginning (YE/YB) meeting in New Orleans and found that many of the people attending were unhappy with their working conditions. So she called the IWW and a campaign was born. This is the e-mail she sent out to interested ACORN workers.
Who is ACORN?
The following text is from ACORN’s website: http://www.acorn.org/who_are_we.html
The website also features lists of ACORN offices across the country.

Who is ACORN?
ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, is the nation’s largest community organization of low- and moderate-income families, with over 100,000 member families organized into 500 neighborhood chapters in 40 cities across the country. Since 1970 ACORN has taken action and won victories on issues of concern to our members. Our priorities include: better housing for first time homeowners and tenants, living wages for low-wage workers, more investment in our communities, banks and governments, and better public schools. We achieve these goals by building community organizations that have the power to win changes -- through direct action, negotiation, legislation, and voter participation.

ACORN stands alone in its commitment to organizing and winning power for low and moderate-income people. As we approach the new millenium, the concerns of low and moderate-income people are not on the nation’s agenda. Under attack from the right, ignored by the center and many progressives, the poor grow in numbers every day. Yet ACORN stands virtually alone in its dedication to organizing the poor and powerless – a dedication as strong today as it was in 1970 when a group of Arkansas welfare mothers formed ACORN’s first membership.

ACORN is the largest low and moderate-income membership organization in the country. ACORN has grown steadily to a membership of over 125,000 African-American, white, and Latino families. They are active members, not just contributors or newsletter readers. Each belongs to one of more than 500 neighborhood chapters working on local, citywide, and national campaigns.

ACORN organizes the unorganized. Although no stranger to coalition politics, ACORN’s first priority is building organization in low-income communities. Because ACORN believes that social change comes from the bottom up, organizers are on the streets every day, knocking on doors and recruiting new members. Major campaigns, whether around housing, or jobs, or voter registration, are designed to reach the unorganized majority of low and moderate-income people – the key constituency that must be mobilized for a progressive movement for social change in this country to succeed. ACORN campaigns address issues that are central to the lives of its members, to the viability of low and moderate-income neighborhoods, and to the future of the country. A typical month might find ACORN neighborhood groups in New York and Chicago campaigning to reform city schools, groups in New Orleans and Boston fighting to pass living wage ordinances, and groups in Detroit and Washington, D.C., demanding testing and treatment for lead poisoning.

At the same time, ACORN groups throughout the country work in unison on national issues. In recent years, ACORN has waged precedent-setting campaigns to win housing for the poor, jobs at living wages for the unemployed, and capital investment for low and moderate-income communities.

ACORN is a direct action organization. ACORN employs the broadest possible range of tactics. It lobbies, petitions, and files law suits. But ACORN’s long history proves that confronting decision-makers face-to-face brings the best results.

When the situation demands it, ACORN members will march, picket, sit-in, squat, and sometimes go to jail.

ACORN views political action as an essential part of its strategy for empowering poor people. When most community organizations still believed in sitting on the sidelines on election day, ACORN was leading the way in voter registration, education, and mobilization. For nearly 20 years, ACORN members have used the electoral arena to press their issues and to put responsive candidates in office. Increasingly, ACORN members are running for office themselves.

ACORN’s low and moderate-income membership runs the organization. ACORN members - not staff or lawyers or politicians – speak for and lead the organization. Many are new to community activism when they join but leadership development is at the core of ACORN’s organizing process. On-the-job and in formal training programs, ACORN members develop the skill and confidence to chart the organization’s course. From the neighborhood group level to the national board, ACORN leaders call the shots.

ACORN’s membership pays for the organization.

Knowing that a poor people’s organization can’t rely on outside support, ACORN has always been committed to the principle of financial self-sufficiency. The organization is now 80% self-sufficient, deriving its funds primarily from members’ dues, raffles, ad sales, dinners, and other events.

ACORN has been, and will continue to be, the most innovative community organization in the country. From its inception, ACORN has constantly challenged the traditional notions of what a community organization is. It pioneered multi-racial and multi-issue organizing. It introduced strategies to contend with corporate targets, led the way in electoral organizing, and advanced direct action tactics like squatting. In recent years, ACORN has taken its path breaking ways in new directions:

- **Union Organizing**
  To reach the unorganized not only in the neighborhoods but in the workplace, ACORN helped found the United Labor Unions in 1979, which succeeded in organizing low wage service workers most unions had ignored. Now affiliated with the Service Employees International Union, AFL-CIO, the Locals in Louisiana, Illinois, Arkansas, and Texas have over 20,000 members working in schools, nursing homes, hospitals, home health care agencies, and other services.

- **Community Media**
  Understanding the power and potential of the electronic media, ACORN members are helping to build a progressive radio and television network. FM radio stations are on the air in Dallas (KNON) and Little Rock (KABF).

- **Housing Development**
  To provide affordable housing and revitalize deteriorating neighborhoods, the ACORN Housing Corporation (AHC) offices in Arizona, Arkansas, Illinois, Louisiana, New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. acquire and rehabilitate abandoned buildings. Low and moderate-income families who contribute sweat equity buy the houses at below market prices and the land remains in the ACORN Community Land Association to ensure that it will always be used for affordable housing. AHC is also the country’s largest provider of pre-purchase loan counseling to low and moderate income people with offices in Baltimore, Baton Rouge, Boston, Bridgeport, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Des Moines, Houston, Jersey City, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Little Rock, Miami, Milwaukee, Minneapolis/St. Paul, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, Phoenix, San Jose, Seattle, Springfield, St. Louis, and Washington, DC. Each year over 10,000 low-income people come to AHC for help in purchasing a house, many of whom never dreamed homeownership was a possibility for them. By year’s end some 2,500 of these people will be new homeowners. The program has produced over 25,000 new homeowners since its start in 1983.
ACORN’s People’s Platform

The following are sections of ACORN’s own People’s Platform (full text at http://www.acorn.org/pp-content.html) which ACORN management has violated by its treatment of its own employees.

Work and Worker’s Rights

III. Provide an adequate income to every American
- Guarantee a minimum annual family income at a figure equivalent to the most recent Bureau of Labor Statistics "medium living standard," adjusted for inflation.
- Extend minimum wage coverage to all wage earners and peg increases in it to the cost of living.

IV. Establish the fundamental rights of workers, to include:
- The right to a job which does not endanger health or safety.
- The right to a job which is accessible from home.
- The right to a job which does not require overtime work as a condition of employment.
- The right to company or government financed child care for the worker's children.
- The right to a fair grievance procedure.
- Most fundamentally, the right to organize, which is to be promoted by:
  a. Extending the National Labor Relations Act coverage to all workers.
  b. Streamlining the union election and certification process.
  c. Restricting the use of anti-strike injunction by courts.
  d. Providing stiff penalties—back wages times five—for employers who fire or demote workers for their organizing activities.
- The right to company or government financed health insurance.

V. Reform the National Labor Relations Act
For workers:
- Permit
  a. sympathy strikes
  b. secondary boycotts
  c. picketing to support sympathy strikes and secondary boycotts.
- Permit automatic union certification when a majority of a bargaining unit has signed authorization cards.
- Permit workers to refuse to handle "Struck work".
- Permit striking workers to receive unemployment compensation, welfare, and food stamps.

For management:
- Prohibit the hiring of temporary replacements to fund anti-union campaigns.
- Prohibit all lockouts.
- Regulate management consultation.
- Regulate management consultants:
  a. Require consultants to file financial disclosure forms with state labor departments.
  b. Prohibit the use of tax dollars to fund anti-union campaigns.
- Prohibit employers from forcing workers to listen to anti-union campaigns.
- Require management to negotiate over what the National Labor Relations Board now calls "permissive subjects":
  Sale of the company, work schedules, pricing, choice of suppliers, organization of management, etc.
- Prohibit the use of bankruptcy as a tool to throw out valid collective bargaining agreements.

VIII. Protect All Workers
- Part-time and temporary workers should receive proportionately the same benefits as full-time workers.
- Workers in unorganized work sites should be able to join unions, and receive the benefits of union membership.
- All workers whether public or private, in small or large numbers, should have the legal right to:
  a. Organize;
  b. Bargain Collectively;
  c. Strike when necessary;
and these rights should be under the full protection of the law.

Will ACORN live up to its principles?
To-Gather was first produced by ACORN workers in Philadelphia with the help of the IWW. It was sent to almost every ACORN office, and about a dozen IWW groups have distributed the newsletter in person to ACORN workers. It reports on what’s going on in different offices and discusses the kind of workplace ACORN organizers would like to create through unionization. There have been four issues since publishing began in February.

A complete collection of To-Gather is available on the web at http://bari.iww.org/alerts/Acorn1.html
A UNION ALLY finds itself the target of an organizing drive.

The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, a group that supports living-wage laws and curbs on predatory lending, often counts on unions for help. But a few Acorn organizers, who canvass neighborhoods on Acorn's behalf, say it opposes their attempt to unionize. Some have alleged unfair labor practices with the National Labor Relations Board.

The workers say they seek better hours and better pay, among other things. Gina Giazzoni, a former Philadelphia Acorn worker, says they also want the right to work in pairs, for better safety. The workers seek representation by the Wobblies of old, the Industrial Workers of the World. Wade Rathke, an Acorn official, says the group doesn't have anything to say about the allegations.

"We've worked with unions throughout this organization's history," he says.
Dramatic Irony

ACORN has led union campaigns across the country. Now the group’s own employees claim they are being punished for organizing.

By Gwen Shaffer

A community organization whose mission is to protect the rights of low-wage workers is refusing to recognize its own employees’ attempts to unionize, several field organizers with the group claim. One employee was fired after she protested outside ACORN’s Philadelphia office last week.

ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) is a national non-profit with an active chapter in Philadelphia. Most recently, ACORN has made headlines for tackling the issue of predatory lending and spearheading a “living wage” campaign, both of which prompted City Council to introduce legislation.

But several field organizers for ACORN—who earn about $20,000 annually—claim that long hours, low pay and unsafe working conditions would be improved if they formed a collective bargaining unit.

In late January, they approached the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) union. Four of seven organizers working at ACORN as of Jan. 29 signed union cards. Since that time, at least one of them quit and one was axed.

“We work 54 hours a week, we work every weekend, and we don’t get overtime pay,” said Gina Giazzoni, 24, who was hired by ACORN in December.

On the morning of Feb. 9, Giazzoni led about 15 people in a picket outside of the ACORN office, located at 846 N. Broad St. That evening, Jeff Ordower, the managing organizer for ACORN, delivered a letter to Giazzoni’s home. It notified Giazzoni that she was “terminated.”

Giazzoni said the letter does not clearly explain why she was fired. But another source speculated that Ordower thinks Giazzoni was working at the IWW office on a day she called out sick to ACORN. Giazzoni and some of her now-former colleagues believe that a collective bargaining agreement would lead to guaranteed eight-hour weekdays, lunch breaks and at least two weekends off per month.

Concerns about safety on the job are also prompting field organizers to seek help from IWW.

Each evening, they are sent out into some of Philadelphia’s most dangerous neighborhoods to knock on doors and recruit new ACORN members. While working for the organization, Giazzoni was in charge of signing up people who live between 31st and 48th Streets, north of Market.

After just two months on the job, Giazzoni claimed she was sexually harassed twice. In December, a potential ACORN member invited Giazzoni into his home, then grabbed her head and kissed her. Another evening, a man loitering on the sidewalk flashed her.

“It’s not safe for us,” she commented. Other ACORN organizers agreed.

“A few days ago, I was robbed at gunpoint,” asserted organizer Ozzie Sims. “Our supervisors haven’t done anything except issue a vague memo saying to take appropriate precautions.”

When field organizers asked to canvas in pairs, management said “no,” according to IWW.

Ordower declined to comment for the record. “This is an internal matter and we are not going to work it out in the press.”

But Giazzoni said that when presented with signed union cards from a majority of the field organizers on Jan. 29, Ordower insisted it would be “illegal” for him to recognize a union in ACORN’s Philadelphia chapter unless field workers in about 39 other offices throughout the country also unionized.

Dorothy Moore-Duncan, regional director for the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), said there is “a presumption that a single workplace is an appropriate bargaining unit.” But that assumption can be challenged, she added, “based on the interchange of employees among offices, the role of labor relations in the workplace and how the office is managed.”

Wade Rathke, Ordower’s supervisor and a co-founder of ACORN, is based in New Orleans. He denies knowing any details about the situation in Philadelphia.

“I’m not particularly aware that workers are trying to organize,” Rathke said, noting that he did receive a fax from the field staff outlining “general issues.”

When questioned about the concerns raised in that memo, Rathke responded, “Now you’re asking me to have memorized it.” But Rathke added that ACORN “supports everybody’s legal rights.”

ACORN employees filed two complaints with the NLRB earlier this month. One, dated Feb. 1, alleges that ACORN threatened “Sims with discharge because of his activities in support of the union.” A second complaint dated Feb. 7 contends that management “interfered with and coerced an employee because of the employee’s union activity.”

The NLRB is investigating the complaints, Moore-Duncan said.

According to ACORN’s website, it is the nation’s largest community organization of low and moderate families, with more than 100,000 members in 40 cities across the country. ACORN helped found the United Labor Unions in 1979, which succeeded in organizing low wage service workers most unions had ignored, the site says.

And ACORN’s Ordower is currently aiding the “Justice for Janitors” campaign in its search for new union organizers.

This is why IWW organizer Alexis Buss says she finds it ironic that ACORN management is resisting unionization in its own workplace.

“Right now, Mr. Rathke is leading a campaign for management neutrality, urging employers to stay neutral instead of fighting against their workers’ organizing efforts,” Buss says. “Meanwhile, the Philadelphia branch of ACORN is fighting the union tooth and nail.”

(Shaffer@citypaper.net)
Philadelphia staff goes on Unfair Labor Practices Strike

On January 29, workers at the Philadelphia ACORN office went on a ULP strike to protest ACORN’s numerous illegal threats made to union supporters and the firing of Gina Giazzoni. On the following pages are copies of the ULPs filed by the IWW with the National Labor Relations Board. The charges are still pending. Similar charges have also been filed against the Dallas ACORN office, where management fired two workers the day after they learned unionization was being discussed.

Here’s Why We’re Striking...

We’re on strike to protest ACORN management’s many unfair labor practices, which began almost immediately after we requested union recognition and have made our working conditions intolerable. Management violates our most basic labor rights, and harasses and threatens workers for organizing.

We organized a union because:

• **We want organizers working in pairs in the field after dark for more safety.** In the past two months one worker was molested, another robbed at gunpoint, and others have experienced harassment. Management responded with a memo claiming that there have been “no major incidents” in the past three years. Maybe they’re waiting for someone to get killed.

• **We want an eight-hour work day, and two weekends off per month.** Fifty-four hours a week is just too much.

• **We want procedures to deal with racial bias.** We’re tired of unequal pay and management insensitivity.

• **We want guaranteed lunch breaks.** Putting in eight or ten hours at a stretch, we need a chance to eat.

**ACORN management can afford to meet these demands.** Instead, they order us to continue unsafe work practices, threaten to fire and subsequently suspending a member of the union organizing committee, telling a worker she can’t have information necessary to do her job because she’s organizing the union, and denying another worker a transfer to a safer job using the union drive as an excuse. These attempts to intimidate and harass union supporters are illegal, and unworthy of an organization established to work for social justice.

*If you agree that ACORN management should stop its illegal union-busting, call “Head Organizer” (and boss) Jeff Ordower at 215-765-0042. Tell him you support the ACORN strikers, and justice for ACORN staff.*

Industrial Workers of the World
PO Box 13476, Philadelphia PA 19101
215-763-1274 box 5
**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

**NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS BOARD**

**AMENDED CHARGE AGAINST EMPLOYER**

**TRUFACIONS:**

An original copy of this page and a copy for each additional cover page must be filed with the Regional Director for the region in which the alleged

1. EMPLOYER AGAINST WHOM CHARGE IS BROUGHT

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<th>Name of Employer</th>
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2. Number of workers employed

3. [Other details redacted]

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

Amended charge must be signed with five copies and two copies for each additional cover page covered by this form. The Regional Director for the region in which the alleged

**By the above and other acts, the above-named employee has incurred, restrained, andcomboom employee in the exercise of the

1. Name of party filing charge of labor organization, give Act.
2. [Other details redacted]

**Declaration:**

I declare that I have read the above charge and that the statements are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

[Signature]

[Date]

HELPFUL FALSE STATEMENTS ON THIS CHARGE CAN BE PUNISHED BY FINE AND IMPRISONMENT U.S. CODE, TITLE 18, SECTION 1011
Seattle staff goes on union recognition strike

The entire staff of the ACORN office in Seattle demanded union recognition on February 26. When their manager, Doug Bloch, refused to recognize their union, the workers decided to go out on recognition strike in order to head off the kind of union busting that ACORN engaged in in Philadelphia, which picked off union supporters one-by-one. The workers have made an offer to return to work, but it has so far been ignored by ACORN management.

ACORN Workers on Strike

Why We’re Striking

We’re on strike to demand union recognition. On Monday, February 26, we requested that management recognize our union, the Industrial Workers of the World, and begin bargaining in good faith.

We organized a union because:

- **We want a 40 hour work week with flex time.** The fifty-four hours we work each week is just too much.

- **Our pay checks must be issued on time and be paid in full.** We can’t pay our rent with IOUs and promises.

- **New hires need information.** When ACORN hires new staff, they must inform them of quotas, the canvass and fundraising schedule, and how "raising your own salary" works before the prospective worker is hired. It’s not fair to keep people in the dark.

- **Health care.** Our health insurance benefits be activated on time.

- **An end to discrimination & harassment.** There should be absolutely no tolerance of sexual harassment, and there must be a statement of employees’ rights and responsibilities posted in the office.

- **No one gets fired for union organizing.** Two workers in the Philadelphia ACORN office were recently fired in retaliation for their organizing efforts. A “social justice” organization like ACORN must guarantee workers the right to organize.

- **Safety on the job.** Workers must be able to decide if they want to work in pairs, instead of alone, while in the field. We work at night, by ourselves, and are too vulnerable when we are alone and nobody knows our exact location. There must also be a clear policy of response to harassment incidents that occur in the field.

ACORN management can afford to meet these demands.

To find out how you can support our effort, call the Seattle office of the IWW: 206-706-6250

Industrial Workers of the World
5215 Ballard NW • Seattle, WA 98115
### Grants received by local ACORN offices

**A report generated for ACORN's YE/YB 2000/2001 meeting**

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**Notes:**
- No report from New York
- (N) = Nationally generated

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<td><strong>Maryland</strong></td>
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<td><strong>New Mexico</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Washington</strong></td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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**Notes:**
- No report from New York
- (N) = Nationally generated
In Solidarity
Letters of support for ACORN Workers

Alice Woldt - Associate Director Church Council of Greater Seattle
I'm sorry you've taken an anti-union position on not recognizing the organizing rights of your employees in the local Seattle affiliate here. As an organization that stands in solidarity with workers in the community, it is hypocritical to not give your own employees the voice they're requesting. The Church Council of Greater Seattle has a long history of working with organized labor in support of workers rights. I encourage you to reevaluate your position in light of your own stated mission. The many community groups here will continue to support the striking workers and you will do irreparable damage to the causes you seek to represent.

Jeff Leys - Senior Staff Representative -- SEIU District 1199W (March 5,2001)
Dear Brother Bloch,
I strongly encourage you to recognize the IWW as the duly selected union for the staff of Washington ACORN. Their demands are just and their rights are clear. It is appalling that ACORN, which fights mightily for the rights of the working class on a day to day basis, is using all of the tactics of the corporate bosses to deny basic rights to its own employees and the citizens of this country.

I am perplexed that ACORN is taking the position that it will only recognize workers who organize into a single national union. Clearly ACORN knows that this is a virtual impossibility for ACORN's workers given the geographical dispersion of workers. ACORN also most assuredly must know that the law permits recognition of individual bargaining units in separate shops across the country. If ACORN's interpretation of the law were to be applied to labor law, it would become virtually impossible to organize any business which operates across state lines. Woe to the nursing home workers for whom I work if ACORN's interpretation of the law were to be applied to Beverly Enterprises, Vencor, ManorCare, Genesis, Horizon and all the other union busting chains out there.

I am also quite perplexed that ACORN is not willing to take simple measures like paying its employees a fair wage; paying its employees overtime wages; establishing a just sexual harassment policy; and taking steps to ensure worker safety on the job.

Again I urge you to recognize the IWW union established by your employees; to discontinue the use of scab labor; and to negotiate in good faith with the IWW workers.

Jeff Leys, Senior Staff Representative
SEIU District 1199W / UP, Milwaukee, Wisconsin & Shop Steward -- OPEIU Local 39

Jeff Mansfield -- President -- American Postal Workers Union, Local# 28 (March 2, 2001)
Dear ACORN Management,
I am writing on behalf of the American Postal Workers Union, Local # 28 to express our Union's support of striking Seattle ACORN workers with Industrial Workers of the World. It is clear that ACORN management should recognize its workers' Union, as all of Seattle ACORN's organizers have been striking on the picket line since Monday, February 26th. Management's refusal to recognize the union and the bringing in of scab replacements is offensive to the labor movement and disgraceful for an organization that claims to fight for the rights of working people. ACORN's management should be ashamed of themselves.

As Union president, I believe that all workers deserve the working conditions that unions have fought so hard for over the past century. Seattle ACORN workers are asking for the same rights to be extended to them. They are asking for an eight-hour workday, lunch breaks, and paychecks issued on time and paid in-full. These are basic demands. The Greater Seattle Area Local of the APWU, AFL/CIO stands in solidarity with the striking workers. We urge management to recognize the union and begin contract negotiations immediately.

Jeff Mansfield
President, Greater Seattle Area Local #28 APWU, AFL-CIO