

**SARAH WHITE's VOICE**

"I bring you greetings from the Mississippi Workers' Center for Human Rights, where I am honored to serve as President of the Board of Directors. The Center was founded by long time human rights activist, Jaribu Hill in 1996. Located in the Mississippi Delta, the Center fights for the dignity and human rights of low wage African American workers and all those who languish in extreme poverty.

When I sat on the "Voices of Victims" panel at the World Conference in Durban in 2001, as an organizer with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 1529, I gave you the history of the struggles of Mississippi catfish workers and the battles we faced everyday for human rights and justice. I described how we as Black women had to stand on our feet for 12 hours a day in ankle-deep water that contained chlorine and other harmful chemicals. This contaminated water caused severe skin rashes and other serious physical ailments. White male supervisors would force us to speed-up our work on the assembly-line so the company could make maximum profit. The bosses did not care about the health and well-being of the workers. Supervisors would terrorize us, making threats, "speed it up or lose your job." We were sexually and racially harassed on a daily basis.

We were denied bathroom privileges. Even when we were allowed to go the bathroom, we were forced to wait long periods of time and as a result many of the elderly workers wore pampers (disposable baby diapers) to keep from soiling their clothes. Many times, white male supervisors would come into the women's bathrooms which had no doors on the stalls. They would stand over us and look at us while we actually sat on the toilet. They would shout, "hurry up and get up and go back to work." These are some of the conditions workers encountered everyday in catfish and poultry plants across the Mississippi Delta. These indignities were suffered by us as workers because of our skin color and economic class. At that time, workers at Delta Pride were given six (6) bathroom breaks a week. Now, in 2009, workers in catfish and poultry plants in the Delta, are forced to clock out and go to the bathroom. In other words, they lose money when they go the bathroom.

I am here today to let you know we rose up and fought Delta Pride for over three (3) months to get justice and human rights. We as African American women

had to show the bosses that we were proud, beautiful Black women who would never again tolerate that type of abuse. We led the largest labor strike in the state of Mississippi. We won that battle and began a workers rights movement all over the state. Plants began to organize. Although we won many battles, we still must continue the struggle to overthrow Jim Crow laws that still exist today. Workplaces are still racially segregated. Black workers still are assigned to the most dirtiest and most dangerous jobs and forced to work under conditions that look a lot like slavery.

*After Durban 2001*

As a labor organizer, I left Durban and returned to the Mississippi Delta. This is where I was born and raised. The Mississippi Delta is often described as the poorest region in the country. Forty-three percent of our population lives below the poverty line and only 5% of the state is unionized. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as an organizer, I found that the same inhumane working conditions still existed across the Delta and the Deep South. I was assigned to go to “hog farm country” in support of the Smithfield workers. These workers suffered all types of inhuman treatment. They were forced to work 12-14 hour shifts. They were harassed and denied bathroom breaks. When they began to organize, several labor leaders were retaliated against and suffered severe beatings at the hands of company goons. At Smithfield, workers were held as prisoners during the workday. The bosses put make-shift health stations up to keep workers from going outside the plant to take care of their personal medical needs. Workers were denied time off and would be terminated when they took their sick children to the doctor. Bosses pit Black and Latino workers against each. They did this to divide and conquer. Tarheel, North Carolina is where Smithfield is located. The hog farms cause tremendous environmental hazards for local residents. The stench is horrible. The exposure to chemicals causes eye infections, skin rashes and serious chronic illnesses including cancer. Many residents must stay inside their homes even in 90-100 degree heat, without air conditioning, to keep from breathing in the harsh chemicals and the awful smell.

As an organizer, I became part of the community. I talked to Black women to urge them to have courage and take a stand. I also worked to build relationships with religious leaders, pastors and others to get their support for the union and the fight for workers’ human rights. Many were afraid, but through our efforts, they gained strength and began to challenge the conditions at Smithfield. Just the other day, I was told that after sixteen (16) years these workers have finally won their right for the union to be organized. It was a victory for the union, but more importantly, it was a victory for the community. This inspired me as a Black woman who worked in slave plantation-like conditions in the Mississippi Delta. This fight was my fight and the fight of all those who believe in justice.

## *The Struggle Going Forward*

Today, I am part of a Black women's leadership group called the Fannie Lou Hamer Roundtable. The inspiration for forming this group grew out of the first Black Women's International Roundtable, which was held in Harare, Zimbabwe in 2000. We meet to support the struggles of Black women in the Delta and other parts of the state. I gain strength from this group of Black women leaders because we come together to address common issues, motivate and strategize. As an organizer, I provide training and encouragement to younger women who are entering the workers' rights movement.

Following the Harare and Durban experiences, I became a national and international voice for oppressed working people all over the world. I speak on college campuses, at libraries, churches and labor rallies to fire people up and get them moving. As president of the Workers' Center, I assist with building campaigns against modern day forms of racial terror (including noose making, attempted lynchings, racist graffiti and Ku Klux Klan intimidation), sexual harassment, wage theft, union busting and retaliation. I along, with other organizers, provide education, organizing support and solidarity for low-wage African American workers, who are victims of various forms of discrimination and other human rights abuses. Without our work, these workers literally do not have any other recourse for getting relief.

The reason I do this work is because as a Black woman, I was put down and forced to fight for my dignity. I was humiliated and subjected to inhumane treatment. Today, I know as an organizer, my story will inspire other Black women. I know that we are now in a better position to fight because we have a Center – a human rights organization in the Delta. We can help all women workers rise up and have a better chance for fairness and human rights in the work environment. On a personal, I am a grandmother of six (6) and I want my grandchildren to know they can grow up in a world where fairness and justice exist and they must raise their voices to be heard".