

# DURBAN

**Intervention of Ms. Sarah White  
Mississippi Workers' Center for Human Rights  
22 September 2011**

On behalf of the countless victims of racial discrimination all over the world it is an honor to carry these voices here today. I bring you greetings from the Mississippi Workers' Center for Human Rights, where I serve as President of the Board of Directors. The Center was founded by long time human rights activist, Ms. 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.

But I'm here today as the voice for those who have been excluded, marginalized, violated and denied their basic human rights.

When I sat on the "Voices of Victims" panel at the World Conference in Durban in 2001 and then again at the Durban Review Conference in 2009, I spoke about 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. These are some of the conditions that workers encounter everyday – today - in catfish and poultry plants. These indignities were suffered by us as workers because of our skin color and economic class.

I am here today to let you know we rose up and fought to get justice and human rights. We held labor strikes and won battles 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. There is racial profanity, intimidation and harassment on a daily basis. Even today, extra-judicial killings still take place. Workplaces are still racially segregated. Black workers are still assigned to the most dirtiest and most dangerous jobs and forced to work under conditions that look a lot like slavery. People are still dying to make a living.

The Center started out 15 years ago assisting low-wage African American workers but we help all workers. We give workers the platform to organize themselves to fight against racial injustices. We educate them about their rights and about laws. We also work on housing and other community issues.

We work through a network of lawyers, educators, teachers, women's groups, social workers and everyday people who are dedicated to protecting human rights.

Students from all over the United States and across the world come to the Center as interns to help us work on cases, educate workers, put out flyers in the community, work with prisoners and people just released from prison. They help us do all the ground work and home work and community outreach.

All kinds of people come to help: rich and poor, white and black, indigenous, from different backgrounds and different religions.

The Center is a space for the community to come together to educate workers. Most important, we work with youth to fight injustices and prevent discrimination in the future. We hold town hall meetings to discuss educational issues in the community – like the fact that there are not enough school books. We all work very hard with very little. Funding is a big concern for us.

The World Conference against Racism and the Durban Review Conference are experiences which I will never forget. I saw that the work that we do is pretty much the kind of work that every civil society group does all over the world. I learned that people are going through the exact same thing, just in a different place.

I remember meeting so many amazing people in Durban, South Africa. I saw people from all over the world, standing up for their rights. I met other victims of racial discrimination. Their courage was so powerful to me. I keep in touch with many of them and we help each other out.

The Conferences gave me hope that I could come back and continue the fight in my community. I think that I have done that.

I really want us to come together on the same front to make sure Governments have open ears to these issues that affect us as human beings. Politicians must be made accountable for what they do. After we elect them, we must make sure that they remember the needs of victims and protect our rights.

Most countries haven't advanced too far from where they were ten years ago in Durban. There is still massive unemployment, and problems with discrimination in the education and prison system. There are still problems with health care and workers rights. Today is a chance for Governments to come together and rise up against racism. I hope that they don't waste this chance. The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action are important to help give people hope and opportunities.

This fight is about all our struggles – people of African descent, people of Asian descent, indigenous, women, children, minorities. Our strength comes from organizing and bringing our voices together on one platform to make the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action work. Thank you.