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Workers unite for human rights

Camden Yards bargaining veterans join laborers in rally for respect, opportunity

By Frederick N. Rasmussen

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About 80 United Workers Association members and supporters marched yesterday afternoon under threatening skies and blustery southeasterly winds from Camden Yards to the McKeldin Fountain at the intersection of Pratt and Light streets to plant a symbolic black-and-yellow flag declaring the entire Inner Harbor a "Human Rights Zone."

"Our goal is to show how human rights have been violated for low-wage workers not only at Harborplace but all over the city," said Bennie Witherspoon, a janitorial worker at Camden Yards, who is a leader in the United Workers Association, a human-rights organization established in Baltimore by homeless day laborers.

"We are declaring the Inner Harbor a zone for human rights," he said.

The rally called attention to the plight of poverty-level workers who say they lack health care or educational opportunities to improve their job prospects.

The Inner Harbor laborers, who work in restaurants and janitorial services, were joined by United Workers Association members from Camden Yards who successfully waged a three-year battle for better wages and working conditions.

Last year, the Maryland Stadium Authority agreed to pay workers - who were making \$7 an hour to pick up trash at Camden Yards - the state's new \$11.30-an-hour "living wage," beginning last spring.

"Workers have identified the same issues that were found at Camden Yards as being present in the Inner Harbor, so we are transferring our efforts from Camden Yards to here, and we hope to be victorious," said Tom Kertes, a UWA leadership organizer.

"We're putting the Inner Harbor on notice. Workers here are demanding that we start the process, and employers have a responsibility to their workers," he said. "And on April 18, 2009, we are going to publicly identify the worst offender."

Kertes said the UWA has yet to speak with business operators in the Inner Harbor, but, he said, "We will be doing that very soon."

Kertes said that the UWA is not a union and does not engage in collective bargaining.

"We believe instead in moral outrage," he said. "Every low-wage worker is entitled to the same longtime respect other workers are given."

Evoking the tried-and-true call-and-shout patois, marchers called out, "What do we want?" "Human rights!" "When do we want them?" "We want them now!"

Dressed in yellow shirts and rain gear against the coming storm, marchers carried signs reading, "Break the Chain of Poverty," "Dignity," "Work With Dignity," and "Health Care for All," as they peacefully circled the demilune-shaped brick-floored park at one of the city's busiest intersections.

Passing motorists offered encouragement by beeping their horns and waving. A city sanitation worker at the wheel of his truck traveling southbound on Light Street gave a rousing series of quick blasts on his air horn.

"All we want is economic parity. That's what we're trying to achieve," said Tanya Diggins, a UWA member and veteran of the Camden Yards struggle.

The arrival of chill autumn rain failed to dampen the spirits of the assembled speakers, who probably truncated their remarks because of deteriorating weather conditions.

"Everyone knows why we're here. We're here today because the Inner Harbor is now a human-rights zone," shouted Verona Dorsey, a UWA organizer.

Donald Gresham, president of the Save Middle East Action Committee Inc., an East Baltimore organization that represents area residents displaced by the 88-acre expansion around Johns Hopkins Hospital, stood before the marchers to say a few words of encouragement.

"I've come here today to show solidarity with you and to tell you where there is no justice, there is no peace," he said.

As the drumbeat of the rain began to pick up, marchers stood firm as they listened to a blessing both in English and Spanish that was conferred upon them by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers, pastor of Light Street Presbyterian Church.

"We believe in the power of nonviolent action. We believe in the power of love," he said.

"We know, dear Lord, that you hear the cries of the poor, and we lift up our prayers to you. ... We ask for justice and human dignity," he said. "We ask that you watch over us during this campaign."

As marchers dispersed into gloomy afternoon rain, they walked away as they had come, shouting: "What do we want?" "Human Rights!" "When do we want them?" "We want them now!"

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