



Helping People Help Themselves



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Catholic Campaign for Human Development
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WORKING FOR JUSTICE IN BALTIMORE

BY BETH GRIFFIN

It's all about human dignity for the United Workers Association in Baltimore, Maryland.

The extraordinarily successful 15-year-old group has tackled seemingly intractable issues by focusing on human rights and values. United Workers' Leadership Organizer Todd Cherkis describes a guiding theme: "Do we believe all life is sacred and worthy of dignity? If so, what kind of society do we want to build?"

United Workers has received local and national funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development for its bold work to win living wages, permanently affordable housing, paid sick leave, and a critical large-scale reconsideration of plans to build a trash incinerator in an urban area. United Workers promotes campaigns that adhere to the principles of universality, equity, transparency, participation, and accountability. Universality means all people benefit, and equity ensures that people's most basic needs are met, Todd says. Transparency means people have access to information about a project. Participation includes all stakeholders in a meaningful way, and accountability measures whether those in charge do what they say they will do.

"WE LIKE TO IMAGINE WHAT JOBS WOULD LOOK LIKE IF THE FIRST QUESTION WAS ALWAYS, 'WHAT DOES WORK WITH DIGNITY MEAN?'"

The group coalesced in 2002 around a grassroots campaign to secure a living wage for men and women day laborers who worked as cleaners at Camden Yards stadium in Baltimore. United Workers was formed by the laborers during that effort and its organizers helped train and develop leaders within the group. Ultimately, the net hourly wage was raised from \$4.00 to its present level of \$13.59. United Workers then turned its attention to collaborating with a local union to secure more than 1,000 living-wage jobs at a new casino at Baltimore's Inner Harbor entertainment complex.

"Through experimentation, study, and collaboration with grassroots leaders, we've developed an effective model for organizing low-wage workers who tend to be excluded from traditional means of securing justice," Todd says. "We like to imagine what jobs would look like if the first question was always, 'What does work with dignity mean?'" Todd notes a sharp decline in living standards for people in the current economy who work two or three minimum-wage jobs to make ends meet. "People are exploited because they don't have paid



The United Workers Association gathered at the Baltimore harbor to advocate for just practices in the workplace.

time off when they're ill or their children or parents are sick. If they leave work to go to the hospital, they lose their job," he says.

The Work with Dignity project of United Workers Association is leading a legislative effort to secure earned paid sick leave for 700,000 low-wage workers throughout the state of Maryland. The group has won support in several counties, and Todd says it's a good omen that the bill recently passed in the legislature before the session ended. Although the bill was vetoed by Governor Larry Hogan, its supporters are organizing an effort to override the veto.

United Workers now has 2,800 members committed to all or parts of its mission to end poverty through leadership

(continued on p. 3)





From the Director

Dear Friends,

It's great to see a group of people inspired to take action to address injustice. It's even better when they can channel the frustration of the moment into examining the cause of the problem and

work together for a lasting solution.

Of course, that's what the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) does so well. We reflect on the social teaching of the Church, which is based on the Gospel, and we help groups of self-directed, low-income individuals change the structures that contribute to poverty. United Workers Association in Baltimore, Maryland, is a fine example.

United Workers grew out of discussions at an abandoned firehouse in west Baltimore that had been turned into a homeless shelter. Cleaners, some of whom lived at the shelter where the meetings were held, earned \$30.00 a game working at Camden Yards stadium in 2002. They made about \$4.50 an hour after their agency deducted the cost of transportation and supplies. Weekly conversations about human rights and the root causes of poverty inspired the cleaners to form the United Workers Association. Their first victory was slow in coming, but heady: they won a living wage that is now \$13.59.

In the years since CCHD first helped United Workers at Camden Yards, the group has expanded its membership to more than 2,800 low-income people. Their passionate and steady commitment to just wages, affordable housing, and environmental sustainability has helped them win against-the-odds victories that have a long-term positive effect. The group's leadership organizer, Todd Cherkis, says that by focusing on

scholarship and reflection, rather than jumping from issue to issue, United Workers builds traction that goes far beyond the adrenaline that might initially attract new members.

Like other CCHD-funded groups, United Workers devotes considerable effort and resources to train and develop community leaders so they can help their neighbors identify and seek solutions to the problems that weigh heavily on their families.

We're grateful that Pope Francis designated November 19, 2017, as the First World Day of the Poor. In his June 2017 message announcing the occasion, he reminds us, "If we want to help change history and promote real development, we need to hear the cry of the poor and commit ourselves to ending their marginalization" (no. 4).

How fortunate we are that the First World Day of the Poor occurs when many parishes are conducting the annual appeal for CCHD, whose theme this year is "Working on the Margins."

Thank you for generously supporting CCHD's persistent efforts to work with low-income people on the margins of our society.

Gratefully,

Ralph McCloud
Director
Catholic Campaign for Human Development

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<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/economic-justice-economy/catholic-framework-for-economic-life.cfm>

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(continued from p. 1)

for housing, jobs, and environmental sustainability. Todd says United Workers is a school for developing leaders. “Our members are students and teachers, and our victories and those of our allies are key textbooks in the larger social movement library,” Todd describes.

“Our campaigns are concrete, but are also classrooms to study economics, history, power, politics, poverty, and racism. At the cellular level, local committees meet on their issues, then get together with others for a curriculum that includes poverty and human rights lessons,” Todd says.

“Leadership training is painstaking and super-challenging. We’ve been working on the paid sick leave for six years! We’re trying to instill a sense of scholarship and reflection,” he explains. “If we didn’t think about the work as educational, we wouldn’t have lasted this long.”

While members may be attracted to the group because they are angry about a problem and want to participate in a protest march, the folks who stay are those who want to think about and study issues and lay the groundwork for long-term solutions, he says.

Permanently affordable housing is a current issue on United Workers’ agenda. The city of Baltimore includes more than 30,000 vacant properties. Todd says many are in low-income areas that have seen no public investment for decades. People who need housing are at the mercy of landlords, who often prevail in disputes brought before judges in rent court. “It’s a recipe for maintaining the status quo,” he says.



Members of the United Workers Association gather to pray and show solidarity.


To address the affordable housing crisis, United Workers has studied solutions used in other cities and determined that permanent affordable housing is best developed through community land trusts. It began working with a cluster of Catholic parishes on the Northeast Housing Initiative, a group whose first land trust housing enterprise is currently assembling financing to rehabilitate a group of homes in north-east Baltimore.

United Workers is collaborating with the Northeast Housing Initiative, other local community land trust groups, union locals, and university representatives as the Baltimore Housing Roundtable. “You have to reach out to other organizations on the front lines of the housing struggle and collaborate to change the things we want to change,” Todd says.

The Roundtable is using its voice to advocate for public investment in permanently affordable housing. This is a challenge, Todd says. “We’re trying to rewire the city to fund improvements, not to gentrify neighborhoods, but to preserve affordable housing.” The group recently won a local ballot initiative to establish an affordable housing trust fund.

In the arena of environmental sustainability, United Workers spearheaded a Sisyphean campaign to scuttle a quiet plan to build a waste incinerator near two schools. In Baltimore, where air pollution-related deaths outnumber homicides, the municipality proposed to site the nation’s largest trash incinerator in Curtis Bay, one of the most polluted communities in the country. Impassioned local students challenged the community to resist the plan. United Workers worked with young people to develop an alternative and present it to various levels of government. They convinced presumptive buyers of the energy that would be produced by the incinerator that they shouldn’t support a large-scale polluter. They also identified permit violations and problems with the proposer’s financing.

In the end, the city backed off from the trash-burning plan. At the urging of United Workers and its youth leaders, the Baltimore City Council passed a resolution to commit itself to “zero waste,” a philosophy that aims to end incineration and the use of landfills by promoting reuse. Ideally, a zero waste program will create new jobs through investment in recycling and composting.

The incinerator win is consistent with what Todd says is United Workers’ moral mission: to place respect for human life and dignity at the forefront of its work. 



The United Workers Association gathered at vacant building to raise awareness about the need for housing in the community.

Meet Members of United Workers Association

Two people who embody the commitment and enthusiasm of the United Workers Association are Destiny Watford and Fr. Ty Hullinger.

As a Franklin High School student in the Curtis Bay neighborhood of Baltimore, Destiny joined classmates to study industry and pollution and to rally against the construction of a huge trash-burning, energy-generating incinerator. Destiny saw firsthand how her mother suffered from asthma exacerbated by the succession of industrial power, chemical, and medical incineration plants in Curtis Bay.

Destiny is a leader of Free Your Voice, a United Workers human rights committee. Free Your Voice organized a successful multigenerational effort with the theme of "Clean Air Is a Human Right." The project was sidelined and Destiny, now a senior at Towson University north of Baltimore, is focused on an alternative plan to develop a community-owned solar panel farm on the projected incinerator site.

In 2016 Destiny was the youngest recipient of the Goldman Environmental Prize, which honors grassroots environmental heroes on six continents.

Fr. Ty is the pastor of St. Anthony of Padua, St. Dominic, and Most Precious Blood Churches in Baltimore and a new consultant member of the CCHD Subcommittee. He was introduced to United Workers eight years ago by parishioners involved in housing justice and prevention of homelessness. "We were studying the Bible together and seeing how Scripture informs our understanding of human rights and Catholic social teaching. United Workers' human

rights principles correlate one-to-one with our own social teaching, especially as it relates to solidarity, universality, and equity," Fr. Ty says.

His parish is part of the Northeast Housing Initiative and works with the Baltimore Housing Roundtable also organized by United Workers. Fr. Ty says, "United Workers is a great partner. It's an organization of low-wage workers who have experienced homelessness and are looking at the causes and solutions to deep-seated problems. They are committed to working for positive change in a deep way that resonates with me."

"It's a great experience for me as a pastor and for our people. We really got into the housing issue and the Curtis Bay incinerator project," Fr. Ty says. "It's been a great education for the parish to go out of our immediate neighborhood, develop a relationship with others, listen to, learn from, and work with them, and then bring that back to the parish."



Destiny Watford and Fr. Ty Hullinger each speak outside of the Maryland Department of the Environment Building at a rally to protest building a trash incinerator near Curtis Bay.

What Is CCHD?

Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the CCHD has contributed over \$300 million to more than 8,000 low-income-led, community-based

projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.



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