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Cory McCray, a local union organizer with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 24, discusses the recent struggle to unionize Comcast workers and explains why he believes unions are essential for the uplift of local workers.

Indyreader: You just finished working on a campaign to unionize local Comcast workers. Can give some background for our readers?

McCray: The campaign targeted a sub-contractor for Comcast. It covered the jurisdiction of DC, Maryland, and Virginia. It has over 100 technicians employed for the company. Comcast subs most of their work out to sub-contractors who come out to the customer's home to perform work on internet, cable, or telephone services. The issues had to do with mainly hours of operation. Most technicians worked six days a week from 7am to 9pm. The wages have consistently been racing to the bottom since 2000, even though their competition, Verizon, pays a living wage. The working conditions were another big issue. There were many deductions from the workers' checks that they felt weren't just, but the workers were scared to bring this to the Department of Labor because they felt as though they may incur some type of retaliation.

Indyreader: How did it turn out? How were you involved?

McCray: The election results are public knowledge and the results were 40 "Yes" votes for the

Union, 58 “No” votes, and twelve “Challenge” votes. I was involved because I was tasked with educating the employees about the benefits of having a contract for their wages, benefits, and working conditions. As an organizer for the IBEW, I was also tasked with educating the workers on what to expect from lawyers, union busters, and supervisors.

Indyreader: Did management attempt to intimidate workers seeking union representation? If so, what specific tactics were used?

McCray: Yes, management used means of persuading workers who supported the campaign to vote against the workers’ best interest. In December, management brought a lawyer on staff that specializes in labor law. At that time, captive audience meetings were held every day by management, and this started when the election date was agreed upon. During this time, management used two methods of persuasion: incentive and fear. On the incentive front, the first week (January 9th to January 27th), checks were given to employees for the deductions they accrued over the weeks. (Every job was judged and based off of accuracy and efficiency. If the customer of Comcast called the operations office and complained that their cable, telephone, or internet was inoperable, the worker could receive a demotion in his performance rate pay and may not receive pay for the recall job that he was sent out to do. The problem with this system was that even if it was a customer error, they were still penalized. Several employees informed me that their pay rate was bumped up from a C Pay Rate to an A Pay Rate.) On the fear front, there were several rumors spread throughout the plant that if the Union was voted in on January 27th, then the shop would close on January 28th.

Indyreader: Have you come across worker intimidation in previous campaigns? How do you work through it?

McCray: Yes, worker intimidation is common during organizing campaigns. The way to work through it is to prepare the workers who sign authorization cards for representation about some of the basic tactics that are used by union busters, such as confusion. If they spread half-truths about the union, the worker isn’t going to know what to believe and will usually adhere to what the norm is, instead of stepping out on faith and getting a contract for their employment. I also try to explain to the workers the importance of sticking together and being informed. When you are one worker standing up to the employer, it is easy for the employer to illegally retaliate, but when you are one hundred workers, the employer is more likely to listen and want to negotiate. Some employers have to realize that every relationship is a partnership. The worker needs the employers, just as much as the employer needs the workers.

Indyreader: You say the “worker needs the employers.” But what are your thoughts on cases where workers have attempted to take over management and collectivize industry? A famous case that comes to mind is when, in 1977, 5,000 steelworkers in Youngstown, Ohio, were told that the steel mill was going to be closed. So they fought to take over the mill and manage it themselves. It wasn’t successful, for complicated reasons, but it does raise important questions: Do workers really need employers? Can they manage the workplace democratically? What are your thoughts on these questions?

McCray: It sounds as though you are talking about worker co-ops. I think that they are a good idea and believe that it is a good tool to have workers take stock in the company, understand some of the risk, and feel a sense of ownership.

Indyreader: In our phone conversation on January 29th, you mentioned that non-unionized workers can face “slavery-like” conditions. Can you elaborate on that?

McCray: Well, when a worker has to work six days a week for more than twelve hours, for low wages, with no benefits, and no retirement—not to mention, has the possibility of having money deducted from his check, if it is a technician error or customer error, yes, I believe that is modern-day slavery. And no American citizen, or citizen in our global economy, should have to work under those conditions—because it only weakens the benefits that were gained by those before us.

Indyreader: Baltimore is not exempt from racism within the working class. It has the effect of dividing black, Latino, and white workers. Have you come across this issue in your organizing experience?

McCray: In reference to organizing, no, but in everyday life, yes. The job market is tight and when things get tight, many people are only concerned about their own well-being and forget that as a unit we are always going to be stronger.

Indyreader: Do you think unions play an important role in addressing racism?

McCray: Yes, unions will always play an important role not only in addressing racism, but also inequality and unjust actions. Being in a union, I was always taught that all workers deserve a fair wage, affordable health care, and a dependable retirement, no matter what race, age, or gender you are. With this model it gives the American society a strong economy, in all neighborhoods.

Indyreader: This issue focuses on jobs and development, and it pays special attention to the Baltimore political economy. For decades, union membership has been on the decline—from its peak in the mid-1950s at almost 35% of the labor force to the current level of less than 12%. With this trend in mind, do you think there is a role for unions in helping to advance the longterm cause of increasing quality employment and advancing overall economic development?

McCray: Yes, the middle class was built off of the backs of union workers and workers willing to stand up to injustice. The gap between the 1% and the 99% was smaller when union density was high. When the decline began, the gap between the 1% and the 99% grew larger at an accelerated rate. The only ways to fix this income gap is to have corporate loopholes closed, and have corporations and millionaires pay their fair share. This existed in the 1950s and 60s, which is why America was a leader in the global economy.

Indyreader: On a personal level, how has union organizing impacted you?

McCray: Union organizing has given me the ability to open my eyes and see what the non-union workers have to endure. It has given me the ability to have courage and speak out against injustice and to fight for workers. It has given me the opportunity to be a solution for the workers, and a problem to the corporations that don't want to pay their fair share!

Indyreader:: Outside of union organizing, you give a lot of talks around Baltimore. What topics do you focus on?

McCray: I focus on worker rights, living wage, and protecting the working/middle class. Every day I wake up feeling as though the American dream is under attack. When I see elected officials,

corporations, and millionaires attacking pensions, living wages, social security, and any other right that workers have fought for, there is a level of frustration that consumes me. To me, when they attack those issues, they are saying that it was okay for our parents and grandparents to have these rights, but future generations are out of luck. We should never be looking for ways to go backwards, but always looking to push forward and leave future generations more than what we started with. But with the direction the country is going in, we are going to be the only generation that was left in worse conditions than our grandparents.

Indyreader: How do you relate your experiences and personal story to ordinary Baltimore residents, like senior citizens, youths, working people, and so on?

McCray: Well, growing up in a single-parent home with a mother that worked every day, living check-to-check, and struggling to pay the bills, I understand the value of being in the middle class. Seeing workers without the ability to retire with dignity and seeing some seniors struggle to pay for their medicine or have to take new mortgages out on their homes that they spent all their life paying for is heart breaking. That is why we fight for the working and middle class. When I see education cuts to the budget and recreation centers being closed, that is why we fight for the working and middle class. When I see workers' pensions being changed to 401ks, tier systems being instituted for young workers, unaffordable college costs for students, etc., that is why we fight for the middle class. The cards are stacked against young workers, and that is why it is going to be imperative that young workers get off the sidelines and get in the game because I was always told, "If you are not sitting at the table, then you are on the menu!"

Indyreader: From an organizing perspective, do you have any ideas or recommendations on how to better encourage Baltimore youth to "get off the sidelines"? Are there any individuals and/or organizations you think are doing this effectively?

McCray: I would encourage Baltimore youth to become more involved in the politics of Baltimore City. I would encourage the youth to be invested in their community. I would encourage the youth to demand a respectable education, in order to keep pace with the global economy. There are tons of young groups within Baltimore that resist being spectators and know that this is a contact sport. Those groups that I salute, for doing a good job mobilizing and organizing are: The Baltimore Algebra Project, Safe & Sound, Baltimore United in Leadership Development (BUILD), Baltimore City Youth Commission, Baltimore City Young Democrats, Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle, and the list could go on. As far as individuals, the list would be too long to name. I would say that the talent, that is within Baltimore, is deep-rooted, and, as the struggle gets worse, I believe more people will step up to the challenge.

Indyreader: For people who may be interested in inviting you to speak at community events, how can they get in touch with you?

McCray: I frequently blog at corymccray.com and my email address is corymccray@gmail.com [3].

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