

## ABSTRACT

WRENN, JAMES WIMER. "The Price of Democratic Government and Freedom: The 1978 Rocky Mount Sanitation Workers Strike." Under the direction of Dr. David A. Zonderman.

From July 10 until September 25, 1978, Black sanitation workers in Rocky Mount, North Carolina waged a successful community-based campaign against racial and worker injustice, including twenty-seven days on strike, in defense of co-worker Alexander Evans. City authorities arrested Evans and suspended him from his job, charging him with allegedly stealing a suit of clothes left near the trash can at a home in the wealthy white Englewood neighborhood of west Rocky Mount. Without a union or formal organization but supported by Black community organizations, workers led by Leonard Giles put their jobs on line and stood fast until they won victory because they felt they would also face similar discipline if the city could so unfairly mistreat Evans, known for his religious convictions and ministry to those in need.

The sanitation workers strike emerged out of a Black organizing tradition in Edgecombe County, an enclave of Black political power during Reconstruction. The workers' victory in exonerating Evans gave momentum to a local African American empowerment movement that led to voting rights advances in Edgecombe County and the 1983 voting rights suit *Naomi Green, et. al. v. City of Rocky Mount*, enabling voters to elect Black-majority governments in Rocky Mount by 2003 and Edgecombe County by 2008. The strike influenced the formation of the Black Workers for Justice in 1981 with Alexander Evans as its first chairperson, led to the organization of the Rocky Mount City Workers Association in 1983 and the statewide UE Local 150 by 1997. This study challenges mainstream narratives of civil rights and Black Power by demonstrating these movements in the rural Black Belt South extending into the late 1970s and argues that the 1978 Rocky Mount sanitation workers strike served as a bridge from the Left and labor in North Carolina during the 1970s to new formations that arose in the 1980s.

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The Price of Democratic Government and Freedom:  
The 1978 Rocky Mount Sanitation Workers Strike

By  
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
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in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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History

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**DEDICATION**

**DEDICATION TO FREEDOM FIGHTERS**

Alexander Evans  
(1934- 2007)



ALEXANDER 'PREACHER' EVANS

Naomi Green  
(1930-1999)



Naomi Green

**FIGURE 1:** Alexander Evans and Naomi Green

## BIOGRAPHY

James Wimer Wrenn grew up in Richmond, Virginia, graduated from Huguenot High School in 1969, attended Virginia Military Institute from 1969 to 1971, then transferred to Duke University where he graduated magna cum laude with honors in history in 1973. He wrote a senior honors thesis entitled “The Politics of Monticello: Psychosocial Studies of Thomas Jefferson and the Political Conflict of the 1790s,” under the direction of Sydney Nathans and the late John W. Cell. Following graduation from Duke, Wrenn took a job working for the Vietnamese Children’s Fund in Durham, North Carolina, conducting peace education and raising money for medical aid to children in both North and South Viet Nam impacted by the war. Moved by a visit to United Mine Workers on strike against Duke Power in Harlan County, Kentucky in 1974, he joined the working class and labor movement.

Wrenn worked at the Duke University heating plant as a member of Operating Engineers Local 465 (1974 to 1977), Firestone Tire & Rubber plant in Wilson, North Carolina, as a member of Machinists Local 2541 (1979 to 1983), and finally at Consolidated Diesel Company, now called Cummins Rocky Mount Engine Plant, in Whitakers, North Carolina (1984 to 2019), as a member of the CDC Workers Unity Committee/Carolina Auto, Aerospace & Machine Workers Union (CAAMWU) chapter of the statewide UE Local 150. After forty-five years as a worker and labor activist, Wrenn retired in 2019 and enrolled in graduate school at North Carolina State University (NC State).

While working, Wrenn continued to pursue historical research projects. From 1983 to 1986, he conducted oral history interviews of Abner Berry, a former Communist Party activist of the 1930s-1950s and a founding member of Black Workers for Justice in North Carolina in 1981. Wrenn completed the initial segment of Berry’s oral autobiography as an unpublished

manuscript, “The Making of a Black Prairie Communist: The Narrative of Abner Berry,” with footnotes and appendix in 1988. Wrenn authored two entries in the *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (1990): “Abner Berry” and “Greensboro Massacre.”

In 2001, Wrenn joined others in founding The Phoenix Historical Society: African American History of Edgecombe County (PHS), based in Tarboro, North Carolina. For the PHS, he successfully researched and nominated to date eight NC Highway Historical Markers. Wrenn served as editor of three PHS publications: *Two Speeches by George Henry White* (2001); *From Slavery to Freedom to Jim Crow: African American History of Edgecombe County: A Chronology* (2003); “*It Wasn’t Just Wages We Wanted But Freedom:*” *The 1946 Tobacco Leaf House Workers Organizing Campaign in Eastern North Carolina* (2006 and 2011 editions). Wrenn served as the PHS’s historical consultant for two documentaries: *City Beat: Sanitation Strike Documentary* (2019) and *We Can Do Better* (2023), both films addressing recent episodes in African American history and the struggle for Black political power in Edgecombe County.

Wrenn is married to Mavis Stith and resides in Edgecombe County, North Carolina. They have a son Corwin L. Farmer and a daughter Jonina Stith Wrenn, who graduated with honors from NC State in 2020.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ACTWU.....	Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union
AFL-CIO.....	American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations
AFSCME.....	American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
ALSC.....	African Liberation Support Committee
BWFJ.....	Black Workers for Justice
CCA.....	Concerned Citizens Association
CCI.....	Consolidated Councils for Improvement
CRJ.....	Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ
CWP.....	Communist Workers Party
FTA.....	Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers of America
GAPP.....	Greensboro Association of Poor People
HRC.....	Rocky Mount Human Relations Commission
ILA.....	International Longshoremen's Association
KOL.....	Knights of Labor
NAACP.....	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NC TUEL.....	North Carolina Trade Union Educational League
NWRO.....	National Welfare Rights Organization
PCJ.....	Peoples Coalition for Justice
SCLC.....	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
TWUA.....	Textile Workers Union of America
UE.....	United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America
WVO.....	Workers Viewpoint Organization

## PREFACE

The Knights of Labor, who organized Black farmworkers in Edgecombe County in the 1880s, popularized their motto “An injury to one is the concern of all.” Twenty-five years later, the Industrial Workers of the World, though not active in Edgecombe County, carried that slogan further by proclaiming “an injury to one is an injury to all.” In 1978, African American sanitation workers in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, demonstrated this maxim as well as most anyone else in labor history. It is indeed a rare event when workers, moreover workers without a union, put their jobs on the line for an unfairly treated co-worker and stand fast until victory is won.

In 1968, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., travelled to Memphis, Tennessee, to support striking sanitation workers there. In his speech at the Mason Temple, the night before he gave his life for Black freedom and workers’ rights, Dr. King urged the workers and their community supporters to follow the example of the Good Samaritan going down the Jericho Road. “You see the Jericho Road is a dangerous road...Let us develop a dangerous unselfishness. The question is not what will happen to me if I stop to help the sanitation workers, but if I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them? That is the question.”<sup>1</sup>

Ten years later, the sanitation workers of Rocky Mount walked out on strike in support of their unfairly treated co-worker Alexander Evans. His co-workers stepped out on faith to go down the Jericho Road. For the sanitation workers, the question was not what will happen to

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King, “I see the promised land,” Speech at Mason Temple, Memphis, TN, April 3, 1968, in James M. Washington (ed.) *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper, 1986), 284-285. Michael Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King’s Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 419-421.

them if they go on strike, but what will happen to Brother Evans if they did not. The workers refused to give up until winning exoneration for Evans and reinstatement to his job in the sanitation department.

Twelve years later, the story of Alexander Evans and the sanitation workers strike victory inspired us as workers at Cummins' Consolidated Diesel Company (CDC) in Whitakers when we petitioned the company for a paid holiday for Martin Luther King Day. Management told us the company would never agree to a new paid holiday. But, following the example of the Rocky Mount sanitation workers, we refused to give up. We campaigned for eight months until CDC management finally announced a new paid holiday for MLK Day. Right away we joined with Alexander Evans and the Bloomer Hill community adjacent to the plant to observe MLK Day each year since. From then on, when CDC workers organized for our union, we could always count on support from Evans and Bloomer Hill. Many times Evans stood in the rain or hot sun or cold wind to pass out flyers to CDC workers urging us to stand up for fairness and join the union. He taught us to assert our workers' rights and never give up. For Evans, the question was not what would happen to him if he stopped to help the CDC workers, but what will happen to us if he did not. He reminded us that people stopped to help him in 1978, and he would never forget to do the same for others. He journeyed down the Jericho Road, just as Dr. King had challenged the workers in Memphis.<sup>2</sup>

I count myself fortunate to have known well the key actors in this story of the Rocky Mount sanitation workers strike and its legacy: Alexander Evans, Leonard Giles, Naomi Green, Shirley

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<sup>2</sup> James Wrenn, President of CAAMWU-UE Local 150, "Closing Remarks, 20<sup>th</sup> MLK Day Celebration at Bloomer Hill," January 18, 2010, in author's possession.

Pinnix, Lucy Lewis, Abner Berry, Saladin Muhammad, Naeema Muhammad and others. I participated in the movement that included them at that time in 1978 and in the movement that has continued the following years since. The courage and determination of these friends and comrades reinforced my lifelong commitment to workers' rights and African American self-determination in the Black Belt South. When I argue that this strike in Rocky Mount served as a bridge from labor and the Left in North Carolina in the 1970s (Workers Viewpoint Organization/Communist Workers Party) to new forms that emerged in the 1980s (Black Workers for Justice), my life followed this path.

In 1978, I worked with the North Carolina Trade Union Education League (NC TUEL) in Durham, while a member of Operating Engineers Local 465 from my three years as a Duke University Heating Plant worker. During that summer, I walked the picket line in Greensboro supporting the Traders' Chevrolet mechanics, affiliated with Local 465, who were on strike. This was one of the six strikes, along with the Rocky Mount sanitation workers, actively supported by the NC TUEL that year. In 1979, I made frequent trips to Rocky Mount on behalf of NC TUEL to assist the Seaboard Foods truck drivers, after the Teamsters Union abandoned them. In December 1979, after recovering from gunshot wounds I suffered in the Greensboro Massacre, I got a job at the Firestone Tire plant in Wilson, joined Machinists Local 2541, and moved to Rocky Mount where I worked closely with Naomi Green and Shirley Pinnix. In 1981, Naomi Green asked me to serve as campaign manager in her historic but unsuccessful election bid for Rocky Mount city council. Later that same year, I met newcomers to town Saladin Muhammad, Naeema Muhammad, and Abner Berry, and began to support their initial efforts to organize the Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ) with the K-mart workers and Alexander Evans.

Consolidated Diesel Company (CDC) in Whitakers hired me in 1984 and I began thirty-five years as a machine operator on the production line. In 1989, the BWFJ began organizing workplace committees at several Rocky Mount area plants including CDC. In 1990, we launched our petition campaign for the MLK paid holiday referenced earlier, which led to the formation of the CDC Workers Unity Committee and later the Carolina, Auto, Aerospace & Machine Workers Union (CAAMWU) chapter of the statewide UE Local 150. Alexander Evans and Saladin Muhammad remained constant supporters and advisors of our efforts for workers' rights.<sup>3</sup>

Now, after retiring from Cummins and embarking on graduate school at NC State, I am writing this thesis to recover and record the history of the 1978 sanitation workers strike, in the context of the larger history of the struggle of African Americans from slavery to freedom in Edgecombe County and eastern North Carolina. Dr. David Zonderman took me under his wing as my advisor in labor history at NC State, sharing what he learned under David Montgomery at Yale. This thesis began as a final paper in Dr. Katherine Charron's "Civil Rights and Black Power Movements" course at NC State. She provided me with critiques, context, guidance, encouragement, and the historian's craft she learned from Tim Tyson at Wisconsin and Glenda Gilmore at Yale. She graciously facilitated my inclusion on a conference panel at the Southern Historical Association in November 2022 to give more exposure to my work on the 1978 strike.

I am also indebted to all other teachers and mentors who have guided my journey as an historian from my years as an undergrad student at Duke continuing through numerous historical

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<sup>3</sup> Mariya Strauss, "Non-majority North Carolina: Cummins Diesel Engine Workers Breathe New Life into an Old Organizing Model," *New Labor Forum*, 24 (20), (2015), 106-110.

research projects since, most especially Sydney Nathans, Robert Korstad, and Robert Hinton. David Cecelski, Benjamin Justesen, and Lane Windham also have provided me feedback and encouragement over the years. NC State professors Tammy Gordon, Brent Sirota, Keith Luria, Susanna Lee, Ebony Jones and Dudley Marchi guided me through course work and final papers. I particularly acknowledge Kerry Taylor and Tameka Kenan-Norman for their interviews of strike participants and supporters that provided such a rich primary source for this thesis. Thanks so much to Lisa Hazirjian for her pioneering dissertation on Rocky Mount's Black working class history and Brandie Ragghianti for documenting the statewide significance of the 1978 strike.

I thank the members of the Phoenix Historical Society: African American History of Edgecombe County and President Mavis Stith for their continued support and pioneering efforts to recover, record and promote the unique history of African Americans of Edgecombe County. Most of all, I treasure Mavis for her support, compassion and insight through twenty-seven years of marriage, and thank our son Corwin for his confidence in me and our daughter Jonina for her inspiration, encouragement and steering me toward NC State. Both the political guidance from Saladin Muhammad, who passed in September 2022, and my continued comradeship with Leonard Giles has served to strengthen me. My recent collaboration with young scholar and close friend Ajamu Amiri Dillahunt-Holloway, whose research interests on the Black Workers for Justice and Abner Berry overlap with mine, has uplifted me. Finally, I appreciate very much the generous assistance received from Traci Thompson, local history librarian at Braswell Memorial Library in Rocky Mount, and the layout design for maps and images by Mickey Friedrich of VIP Printing in Rocky Mount.

Jim Wrenn  
Tarboro  
Edgecombe County, North Carolina  
May 15, 2023



Knights of Labor<sup>4</sup>



Industrial Workers of the World<sup>5</sup>

**FIGURE 2:** Seals of the Knights of Labor and Industrial Workers of the World

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<sup>4</sup> [http://mill-valley.freemasonry.biz/fraternal-images/the\\_grat\\_seal.gif](http://mill-valley.freemasonry.biz/fraternal-images/the_grat_seal.gif)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.rlmartstudio.com/product/an-injury-to-one-is-an-injury-to-all/>

## Introduction

*“The suffering of the sanitation workers and the Rocky Mount community is a price that must be paid for democratic government and freedom.”<sup>6</sup>*

On February 18, 2022, Marjorie Evans, self-described “country gal” from Whitakers, North Carolina, spoke to people gathered at the corner of Spruce Street and Atlantic Avenue in Rocky Mount to witness the unveiling of a city sign honoring her late husband Alexander, who worked as a city sanitation worker from 1977 until his retirement in 1996. She recalled how her husband would routinely pick up discarded items on his trash collection route to refurbish and give to those in need. Even though the Evans family with seven children did not have much, Alexander always saw fit to help others. She remembered the day in June 1978 when he brought home a cream-colored men’s suit. She asked him, “What did you bring this home for? You should have left this in the trash! Looks like somebody has been wearing this for years and it needs cleaning. Ain’t nobody going to wear this.” The next day, Alexander asked her where that suit he had brought home the previous day. “I have got to take that suit back to work, because they are asking me for it,” he said. “That’s when all hell broke loose. They were setting him up,” Marjorie said. “They accused him of stealing the suit. When the case finally came to trial, the suit that was brought into the courtroom was like brand-new. Nothing like the suit Alexander had picked up.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Concerned Citizen’s Association, “A News Conference, 8/30/78,” in author’s possession.

<sup>7</sup> William West, “Sign honors man who inspired strike,” *Rocky Mount Telegram*, February 19-21, 2022, 1; Marjorie Evans, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 13, 2018, Sanitation Strike Daily for 121318, <https://youtu.be/XkelwRbhGZg>, accessed March 10, 2023.

The arrest and suspension of Alexander Evans for alleging “stealing” a suit left by the trash cans in a white neighborhood sparked the 1978 Rocky Mount sanitation workers strike. One local minister and civil rights leader called this protest “the greatest drama in Rocky Mount history.” The legacy of this strike went far beyond the fate of a cream-colored suit and a Black sanitation worker.<sup>8</sup>

Several scholarly articles and one documentary address the significance of the 1978 sanitation workers walkout. In a 2007 conference paper, Lisa Hazirjian described how the strike reflected “ideological divisions in the African American freedom struggle” between Black middle class and working class leadership of the movement. In a 2018 research paper written for the Phoenix Historical Society, Brandie Ragghianti observed that the strike “highlighted a winning strategy for labor activists...through grassroots organizing, linking labor rights to civil rights...that influenced future labor organizing in North Carolina,” referring to the rise of the Black Workers for Justice and the statewide UE Local 150. Tameka Kenan-Norman, at the time communications director for the City of Rocky Mount, produced a powerful fifty-eight minute documentary in 2019, including new interviews with key participants. The film outlined the strike’s impact on the struggle for voting rights and Black political power resulting in Black majority city government in Rocky Mount today.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Stan Hollowell, “Sanitation Workers To Return,” *Evening Telegram* [Rocky Mount, N.C.], August 30, 1978, 8, quoting Rev. Thomas L. Walker, chair of the Concerned Citizens Association.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Hazirjian, “A Question of Ownership: The Sanitation Workers Strike of 1978 and Ideological Divisions in Rocky Mount, North Carolina’s African American Freedom Struggle,” paper presented at the Southern Labor Studies Conference, Durham, NC., May 2007, in author’s possession; Brandie Ragghianti, “The 1978 Rocky Mount Sanitation Workers Strike: An Argument for Statewide Significance,” paper prepared for Phoenix Historical Society, Tarboro, N.C., 2018, in author’s possession; Tameka Kenan-Norman, City of Rocky Mount, *City Beat: Sanitation Strike Documentary*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWMgKZCdyks&feature=youtu.be>, accessed March 10, 2023.

Casting a broader net, this study situates the strike within the context of North Carolina's Black Power and New Communist Movements of the 1970s, as related by Kenneth Janken, Devon Fergus and others. New communist groups like the Workers Viewpoint Organization (WVO) held that African Americans living in the Black majority counties of the South, the "Black Belt," constituted an oppressed nation within the U.S. with the right to self-determination. For this reason, the strike of Black sanitation workers in Black Belt Edgecombe County carried special importance for the WVO and its affiliates, the African Liberation Support Committee (ALSC) and the North Carolina Trade Union Education League (NC TUEL). This study further argues that the 1978 sanitation strike served as a bridge from the Black Power and New Communist Movements of the 1970s to new labor and Left formations such as the Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ) that arose in the 1980s in the wake of the decline of the WVO, renamed the Communist Workers Party, following the Greensboro Massacre of November 1979.<sup>10</sup>

Equally significant, the 1978 sanitation workers strike reflected a Black agency in Edgecombe County and eastern North Carolina that Cedric Robinson described in *Black Marxism* as an

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Janken, *The Wilmington Ten: Violence, Injustice and the Rise of Black Politics in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015); Devon Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power and the Making of American Politics, 1965-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009). The "New Communist Movement" refers to New Left formations that arose in the 1960s and 1970s, inspired by the Cuban and Chinese Revolutions, in opposition to the Soviet-oriented "revisionist" Communist Party USA. Groups in North Carolina included the Black Panther Party, Progressive Labor Party, Revolutionary Workers League, Workers Viewpoint Organization/Communist Workers Party, Revolutionary Communist Party and others. On the Black Belt Nation thesis, see Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978), 231-234. On November 3, 1979, Ku Klux Klan and Nazis shot into an anti-Klan rally in Greensboro, killing five CWP activists and wounding eight others, including the author: James Wrenn, "Greensboro Massacre," in Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (New York: Garland, 1990). On ALSC, see Abdul Alkalimat, *Dialectics of Liberation: The African Liberation Support Committee* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2022).

indigenous “Black radical tradition” and Steven Hahn characterized as a “Black organizing tradition” that stretched back to the era of slavery. Such a Black radical tradition in the eastern North Carolina struggle from slavery to freedom expressed itself in the 1834 court case of enslaved Will against the State and the Civil War era formation of the African Brigade of the Union Army in New Bern and Washington, N.C. During Reconstruction, the Black radical tradition manifested in the political and economic organizing of the Black-led Equal Rights League and Union League of the 1860s and the Black local assemblies of the Knights of Labor in the 1880s and 1890s. Though repressed by the 1898 white supremacy campaign and Wilmington Massacre, followed by Black disfranchisement and Jim Crow segregation, the Black radical tradition in Edgecombe and eastern North Carolina first re-emerged by way of the 1946 tobacco leaf house workers organizing campaign and then again in the 1970s.<sup>11</sup>

In his Pulitzer prize winning *A Nation Under Our Feet*, Hahn argued that “African Americans in the rural South contributed to the making of a new political nation while they made themselves into a new people—a veritable nation as many of them came to understand it.” Hahn also suggested that African Americans “exposed...the complex and contradictory relation

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<sup>11</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1981, 2000); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 104-106. Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 473. Robinson coined “racial capitalism” to delineate racial oppression as fundamental to the historical development and profitability of European capitalism, beginning with the African slave trade. For examples of the Black radical tradition in eastern North Carolina, see N.C. Highway Historical Marker essays: “State v Will,” E-123; “African Americans Defend Washington,” B-74; “Equal Rights League,” E-129; “Knights of Labor,” E-122; “George H. White,” E-116; “Operation Dixie,” E-118; “Sanitation Workers Strike,” E-125; [www.ncmarkers.com](http://www.ncmarkers.com), accessed March 29, 2023. For more on the Black radical tradition in eastern North Carolina, see also David Cecelski, *The Fire of Freedom: Abraham Galloway and the Slaves’ Civil War* (Chapel Hill: UNC press, 2012) and William Henry Singleton, *Recollections of My Slavery Days*, edited by David Cecelski and Katherine Mellen Charron (Raleigh: NC Archives and History, 1999).

between labor and political democracy in the United States. For we must remember...when they were slaves, freedpeople, and subject race—African Americans were also overwhelmingly workers.” Hahn laid out the tension or contradiction embedded in Black labor struggles, as either primarily of a working class character or an African American national character, often labeled as “civil rights” or “race” struggles. Or in other words, Hahn pointed out the inherently political nature of Black labor struggles, especially in the South where the white ruling class subjugated African Americans under a system of racial segregation.<sup>12</sup>

Michael Honey, Robert Korstad, and Laurie Green have written on Black labor, civil rights, and political democracy in the South in the twentieth century, emerging out of the post-Civil War emancipation and subsequent white supremacists’ violent overthrow of Reconstruction by 1900. Black workers in the states of the former Confederacy lived under a political repressive regime Honey called the “racial-economic system of southern apartheid.” Korstad described the system as “racial capitalism,” and explained the “consolidation of racial capitalism created a separate low wage labor market in the South that depended on the exploitation of black labor, served as a magnet for runaway northern industries, undercut the labor movement, and pulled national wage standards down.” Just as important if not more so, southern apartheid denied Black voting rights, reducing African Americans in the South to colonial-like status within the United States.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 9. What Robinson described as “Black radical tradition,” Hahn called African American “organizing traditions” whose “genealogies extend deep into slavery and early emancipation.” 473.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 9; Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2003), 5; Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007); Michael Honey, *Jericho Road*. Cedric Robinson coined “racial capitalism” in *Black Marxism* referring to European economy rooted in profits from the African slave trade (see Note 11) and used the term more broadly than Korstad, who employed “racial capitalism” to describe the political economy of North Carolina after 1898. On the colonial-like status of

The Rocky Mount sanitation strike transpired amidst ongoing struggles against the oppression of African Americans in the eastern North Carolina Black Belt. In the summer of 1977, the local Peoples Coalition for Justice (PCJ) organized a community campaign to protest the killing of Black farmworker Charlie Lee by white store owner Joe Judge in Whitakers, twelve miles north of Rocky Mount. ALSC members from Durham and Greensboro led by Nelson Johnson came to Whitakers to play a leading role in the PCJ project. The campaign for justice for Charlie Lee culminated in a “Peoples’ Trial” of Joe Judge (*in absentia*) at the Bloomer Hill Community Center after the local district attorney failed to press murder charges against Judge. As their protest signs indicated, the PCJ served notice that African Americans in Nash and Edgecombe Counties wanted “Black Power” and “Self-Determination for the Black Belt Nation.”<sup>14</sup>

The Rocky Mount sanitation workers strike of 1978 certainly echoed the Memphis sanitation workers strike ten years earlier, when “garbage workers” proclaimed “I Am A Man” and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sacrificed his life for the cause. As in Memphis, the Black community of Rocky Mount rallied at public meetings, picketed downtown businesses and city hall, and marched by the hundreds in support of the workers as curbside trash piled high in the summer heat. Even though Dr. King came to Rocky Mount in 1962 and proclaimed “I Have a Dream” to 1,800 people packed into the Booker T. Washington High School gymnasium, people

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African Americans in the South after 1900, Charles B. Aycock, leader of the 1898 white supremacy campaign in North Carolina, said “in Cuba, Porto Rico and the Philippines, the negro not only does not vote, but is shot by our government for even wanting to vote.” John Haley, “Race, Rhetoric, and Revolution,” in David S. Cecelski and Timothy Tyson, eds., *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1998), 218. The U.S. conquered Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii and the Philippines in 1898, the same year as the Wilmington coup d’etat in North Carolina, consolidating colonial-like status of the Black Belt South similar to these other countries subjected to U.S. imperialism.

<sup>14</sup> Workers Viewpoint Organization, “Whitakers Scrapbook I” (1977), 34, in author’s possession.

remembered the 1978 strike as Rocky Mount's "civil rights moment." However, given the context of African American militancy and labor radicalism across the state, it is more accurately described as an example of Black Power. Michael Honey has argued that after 1966, "as economic [and political] issues came sharply into focus, the civil rights movement took a sharp turn in the direction of Black Power."<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, this study situates the 1978 Rocky Mount strike in the context of Black sanitation workers' strikes across the South in the decade following the 1968 Memphis strike. Civil rights leader Rev. James Lawson, who worked alongside Dr. King, described the Memphis strike as a "threshold moment" linking labor and civil rights/Black Power. Michael Honey, Laurie Green, Joseph Hower, Joseph McCartin, Darryl Paulson and Janet Stiff have all written on the Memphis and subsequent strikes of sanitation workers in the South. They have highlighted the particular role of Black sanitation workers in advancing the freedom movement by "battling the plantation mentality" they faced from white management and the municipal and state power structures.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "Martin Luther King, Jr." essay for marker E-112; "Sanitation Workers Strike," essay for marker E-125, [www.ncmarkers.com](http://www.ncmarkers.com), accessed October 23, 2020. While some scholars may describe the 1978 Rocky Mount strike as a part of the "Long Civil Rights Movement," others would argue Black Power. See Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History*, v. 91, no. 4 (March 2005), 1233-1263; Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Struggles," *Journal of African American History*, vol. 92, no. 2 (April 2007), 265-288; Honey, *Jericho Road*, 82. Within the movement against racial segregation in the South and United States, "civil rights" refers to racial integration, whereas "Black Power" refers to Black self-determination.

<sup>16</sup> Honey, *Jericho Road*; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*; Joseph Hower, "'A Threshold Moment': Public Sector Organizing and Civil Rights Unionism in the Postwar South," in Matthew Hild and Kerri Leigh Merritt (eds.), *Reconsidering Southern Labor History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2018); Joseph McCartin, "'Fire the Hell Out of Them': Sanitation Workers' Struggles and the Normalization of the Striker Replacement Strategy in the 1970s," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, v. 2, issue 3 (2005); Darryl Paulson and Janet Stiff, "An Empty Victory: The St. Petersburg Sanitation Strike, 1968," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, v. 57, no. 4 (April 1979).

Examining Black radical activism and statewide activist networks in the 1970s challenges mainstream narratives of both the civil rights and the Black Power movements. In 2009, Black Power scholar Peniel Joseph noted that William Chafe previously countered those scholars, such as Clayborne Carson, who attribute the demise of the 1960s civil rights movement to Black Power in a “declension narrative:” that is to say, violent tactics and angry rhetoric associated with “Black Power” led to the decline of the civil rights movement and retreat from “more effective organizing.” On the contrary, Joseph suggested that Chafe’s Greensboro-based study, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, “documents a manifestation of black power politics deeply embedded in the hopes, dreams and everyday struggles of local people.” Joseph cited Chafe as arguing “the vehicle for achieving this power was to be community organizing...focusing on local issues such as poverty, education and labor rights that struck at the base of white power.” Where Chafe focused on the urban Piedmont, this study looks to rural eastern North Carolina and demonstrates a continuity on the ground between civil rights and Black Power movements extending into the late 1970s beyond what some scholars have previously determined.<sup>17</sup>

Nelson Johnson, Joyce Johnson, Shirley Pinnix and other Black liberation advocates from Greensboro and the urban Piedmont reached out and engaged in Black Belt struggles such as the Whitakers Peoples Coalition for Justice (PCJ) in 1977 and the Rocky Mount sanitation workers strike in 1978. As a victorious job action of Black workers supported primarily by the African American community, the 1978 sanitation workers strike paved the way for the emergence of a

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<sup>17</sup> Peniel Joseph, “The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History*, v. 96, no. 3 (December 2009), 756-757; William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, 1981), 173-175; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 233. Previous scholars suggest 1975 as the year of decline for the Black Power movement.

Black workers organization, Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ), in 1981. The BWFJ followed in the Black radical tradition of Detroit's League of Revolutionary Black Workers (1968-1973), which William Van Deburg has called an expression of "Black Power and Labor." Inspired by the success of the 1978 sanitation workers strike, the BWFJ pioneered a grassroots, pro-union, community-based organizing strategy in North Carolina that eventually produced a Black-led, Black majority statewide social justice union, UE Local 150.<sup>18</sup>

In the local area, the leadership and character of co-workers Alexander Evans and Leonard Giles and freedom fighters Naomi Green, Shirley Pinnix, and Lucy Lewis shaped this collective action among the sanitation workers and the community, guiding the movement to victory. They left a legacy that reached beyond this moment to inform a new generation of activists who fought for and won Black majority rule in local government. At the thirtieth anniversary of the strike in 2008, Giles told an audience, "I learned that there is a price we have to pay for freedom. And if we're not willing to stand up, you might as well not step out...The sanitation workers' strike...taught me that when you're right and you're willing to stand up, victory is going to come." This is their story and their victory.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 92-97; Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Rebellion* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1998) on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers; see Raghianti, "The 1978 Rocky Mount Sanitation Workers Strike," for the 1978 strike's contributions to BWFJ and rank and file, community-based union strategy of statewide UE Local 150.

<sup>19</sup> Mike Hixenbaugh, "Alliance marks 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of sanitation strike: City workers stood up to inequality," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, August 31, 2008, 3A. Before 1995, this newspaper was titled the *Evening Telegram*. I will retain that name for pre-1995 citations that follow in this thesis.

## Chapter One: From Slavery to Freedom in Edgecombe County

The victory of the 1978 Rocky Mount sanitation workers strike by way of an African American community-based movement reshaped the labor movement in North Carolina and advanced the long struggle for Black political power in Nash and Edgecombe counties. The strike stands out as the major Black freedom struggle in Rocky Mount history. Black workers put their jobs on the line in solidarity with a suspended and arrested co-worker, Alexander Evans. In June 1978, a white family in the wealthy Englewood neighborhood unfairly accused Evans of “stealing” a suit of clothes left by the trash cans during his garbage collection route. Yet city management had always told sanitation workers that they could pick up anything left within five feet of the receptacles. Called “Preacher” by his co-workers, Evans routinely retrieved discarded items to give to people in need, as the Rocky Mount *Evening Telegram* had reported eight months earlier.<sup>20</sup>

Workers stood fast in their campaign on behalf of Evans from July 10 to September 25, 1978, including twenty-four days on strike, until they won Evans’ exoneration and reinstatement to his job in the sanitation department. This victory stands as a notable achievement for a group of workers without formal union organization. The strike also sparked a broader movement for change locally. Though this protest centered on the injustice to Alexander Evans and the sanitation workers, the entire African American community felt the pain of oppression from the white power structure that still ruled the North Carolina Black Belt over a decade after the

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<sup>20</sup> George Dudley, “He Feels Good When He Helps Other People,” *Evening Telegram* [Rocky Mount, N.C.], November 25, 1977, 11 (see Appendix B); Millie Buchanan, “Evans: An Ironic Figure,” *Evening Telegram*, August 15, 1978, 9.

passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The workers and community supporters translated their strike victory into political action by challenging the racially biased at-large election method for city council and calling for action on voting rights. The ability of Black workers and their community allies to secure justice for Evans, inspired confidence and reverberated throughout Nash and Edgecombe counties, fueling momentum for renewed resistance against white supremacy in local politics.

To understand the significance of the 1978 Rocky Mount sanitation workers strike, we must first go back and understand the history of Edgecombe County and the long struggle of African Americans from slavery to freedom. By the 1840s, enslaved Africans brought in to labor on the county's cotton plantations outnumbered white people and Edgecombe County has maintained a Black majority population ever since. In the 1850s, Edgecombe became the top cotton producing county in North Carolina: a Cotton Kingdom along the Tar River, resembling more the Deep South's Mississippi Valley than the Upper South. Yet even after emancipation from enslavement and securing the franchise, the African American majority of Edgecombe County faced the continued denial of the benefits of democratic rule by an entrenched, stiff-necked white minority ruling class.<sup>21</sup>

Rocky Mount, North Carolina lies on the falls of the Tar River and straddles the CSX railroad's major north-south line. Since 1871 this railroad has served as the boundary between majority Black Edgecombe County and majority white Nash County. The rail line was originally named the Wilmington & Weldon Railroad and, when completed in 1840, was the longest

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Hinton, *The Politics of Agricultural Labor: From Slavery to Freedom in a Cotton Culture, 1860-1901* (New York: Garland Press, 1997).

railroad in the world. Wealthy Edgecombe cotton planters built the railroad to transport their “white gold,” picked by over ten thousand enslaved African laborers in the county, to market in Wilmington for shipment overseas. The railroad did not divide Rocky Mount into two counties at that time. Rocky Mount was situated entirely in Edgecombe County.<sup>22</sup>

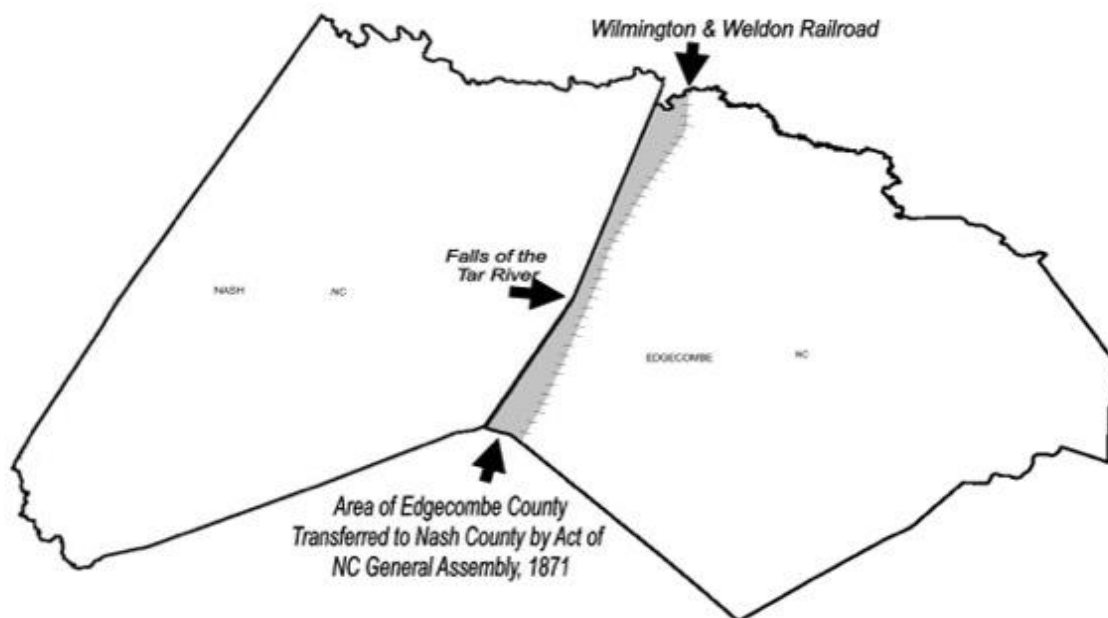
White supremacy changed the map during Reconstruction. Black men gained the right to vote in North Carolina’s Reconstruction Constitution of 1868, and Edgecombe voters elected Blacks and allied whites to county office and the state legislature. But white supremacists across the state retaliated against Reconstruction with a Ku Klux Klan terror campaign and a conservative takeover of the North Carolina General Assembly in the election of 1870. This General Assembly enacted a law in 1871 to move the Nash/Edgecombe county line from the Falls of the Tar to the Wilmington & Weldon Railroad, splitting the Edgecombe county towns of Whitakers, Battleboro, Rocky Mount and Sharpsburg. This bill transferred hundreds of Black voters from Edgecombe, then electing Black representatives, to white majority Nash, which did not elect Blacks to any office. This bill also transferred Rocky Mount Mills, Edgecombe’s largest tax payer and cotton mill owned by the wealthy slave-owning Battle family, to Nash County. Nash also gained half of the railroad revenue running through the city as well. Over five hundred Edgecombe citizens signed a petition of protest to the General Assembly to no avail.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> George Kennedy, “Wilmington & Weldon Railroad,” 2006, <https://www.ncpedia.org/wilmington-weldon-railroad/> accessed September 20, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Balanoff, “Negro Legislators in the North Carolina General Assembly, July 1868-February 1872,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, v. 49, no. 1, (January 1972), 25-55; B.M. Bass, Jr. and Bill Bourne, “When Edgecombe Lost to Nash,” *Daily Southerner* [Tarboro, NC.], Bicentennial edition, 1976; Lucas Kelley, “The Historical Origins of the 1871 Nash-Edgecombe County Line,” <https://www.rockymountmill.prospect.unc.edu/mill-history/narrative/moving-the-county-line/>, accessed March 8, 2023.

## *Nash/Edgecombe Boundary prior to 1871*



Reference: *Atlas of Historical County Boundaries*, The Newberry Library,  
Dr. William M. Scholl Center for American History and Culture, Chicago, Illinois  
<https://publications.newberry.org/ahcbp/map/map.html#NC>

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**FIGURE 3:** Nash/Edgecombe 1871 Boundary Change

Thus began a long struggle of African Americans to regain and defend political power in Rocky Mount and Edgecombe County. In 1876, Edgecombe voters elected a Black majority to the board of county commissioners for the first time. In reaction, the state General Assembly passed the County Government Law of 1877, removing the right of the voters to elect their county commissioners and giving that power to justices of the peace appointed by the General Assembly. Not giving up, nine years later Frank Whitted, one of the Blacks elected to the Edgecombe county board ten years earlier, began organizing Knights of Labor (KOL) local assemblies among Black farmworkers on the cotton plantations “in every voting precinct,” as he later recalled. He consciously linked Black labor organization to voting rights and political power. His efforts translated into voters electing young farm laborer and KOL leader Frank Hines as county Register of Deeds in 1886 and 1888.<sup>24</sup>

In 1888, the Black KOL local assemblies in Edgecombe and surrounding counties played a pivotal role in electing Henry Cheatham to Congress, the third African American to represent the “Black Second” Congressional District. Cheatham in turn appointed several KOL local leaders as postmasters, including Weeks Armstrong in Rocky Mount, leader of KOL Local 10848. Whites in Rocky Mount did not welcome a Black postmaster and a postal inspector had

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<sup>24</sup> Hinton, *The Politics of Agricultural Labor*, 100-101, 119-120; *The Evening Star*, [Washington, D.C.], January 2, 1939, A-5; *Washington Tribune*, [Washington, D.C.], January 11, 1941; Laura K. Rebbe, “The Negro and Politics in Edgecombe County, North Carolina, Before and After Disfranchisement, 1870-1920,” (Senior thesis, Duke University, 1985); James Wrenn, “Knights of the Black Second,” (Final paper, HI 598, NC State University, 2020), in author’s possession. *Tarborough* [N.C.] *Southerner*, November 8, 1888, February 21, 1889, on Frank Whitted and Frank Hines as KOL leaders in Edgecombe County.

Armstrong arrested and removed on allegations of embezzlement, one of many efforts by whites to discredit Black elected or appointed government officials in Edgecombe County.<sup>25</sup>

Still searching for economic and political justice in the 1890s, Black KOL members and white Populists in Edgecombe County joined the statewide Fusion movement that challenged the white conservative Democrats and elected bi-racial majorities to the N.C. General Assembly in 1894 and 1896. The fusion General Assembly repealed the County Government Law in 1895 so voters could once again elect their own county commissioners. But before Edgecombe citizens could elect a Black majority, the violent 1898 white supremacist campaign resulted in the fraudulent state referendum of 1900 disfranchising Black voters in the state. White supremacists thwarted political and economic power for the Black majority of Edgecombe County once again.<sup>26</sup>

With the triumph of white supremacy and what historian Robert Korstad called “racial capitalism” in North Carolina, Edgecombe County transitioned from a cotton culture to a tobacco culture. Rocky Mount became the financial and cultural center of eastern North Carolina’s “tobacco towns,” with fourteen tobacco auction warehouses and ten leaf house factories employing all Black and mostly female workers.<sup>27</sup> During these years of Jim Crow, African

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<sup>25</sup> Eric Anderson, *Race and Politics in North Carolina, 1872 to 1901: The Black Second* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1982), 149; *Wilmington Messenger*, March 25, 1890; Weeks S. Armstrong to *Journal of United Labor*, November 12, 1887, Weeks S. Armstrong to *Journal of United Labor*, January 24, 1890 (on Rocky Mount Post Office letterhead), Powderly-Hayes Papers, American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives, The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. In 2021, Nash County state senator Lisa Barnes sponsored a bill to empower state auditor to criminalize financial mistakes of local officials, aimed at Blacks on Rocky Mount city council, using the legislature to undermine local Black Power. See Saladin Muhammad and Dr. Kim Koo, “Senate bill aims to diminish Black political power,” *Rocky Mount Telegram*, [Rocky Mount, N.C.] July 3, 2021. NOTE: The *Evening Telegram*, Rocky Mount’s newspaper for years, was renamed the *Rocky Mount Telegram* under new ownership in 1995.

<sup>26</sup> Hinton, *The Politics of Agricultural Labor*; Jeffrey Crowe and Robert Durden, *Maverick Republican in the Old North State: A Political Biography of Daniel L. Russell* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1977).

<sup>27</sup> Roger Biles, “Tobacco Towns: Urban Growth and Economic Development in Eastern North Carolina”, *North Carolina Historical Review*, v. 84, no. 2 (April 2007), 156-190. Rocky Mount tobacco barons hosted annual “June

Americans in Rocky Mount and Edgecombe County made several efforts to assert political power. In 1946, Rocky Mount became the launching point for the tobacco leaf house workers' union organizing campaign in eastern North Carolina, part of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) 's Operation Dixie. Black workers, primarily women, at the China American Tobacco Company in Rocky Mount first voted for the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural & Allied Workers (FTA-CIO) in September 1946. Workers in twenty-six more plants soon followed suit in towns across eastern North Carolina, in a movement of ten thousand Black workers that Korstad has called "civil rights unionism." The union challenged Jim Crow and registered Black workers to vote, mobilizing voters to the polls in the 1947 and 1948 elections.<sup>28</sup>

On the national level, corporate tycoons and the National Association of Manufacturers responded to the stunning success of the FTA-CIO among Black workers in North Carolina as well as the union threat of the CIO's Operation Dixie among workers all across the South. To curb workers' rights under the 1935 Wagner Act, corporations and segregationist southern lawmakers pushed the Taft-Hartley Act through Congress in 1947, which included provisions for states to pass so-called "Right To Work" laws outlawing union shops and mandatory dues checkoffs. Along with other Southern states, North Carolina's legislature passed its "right to

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German Dances" with well-known "Big Bands" for the eastern North Carolina white elites in a downtown auction warehouse from the 1880s into 1960s. Blacks held their own "June German" all-night dances with the "Big Bands." Elijah Gaddis, "The June Germans," 2013, <https://www.ncpedia.org/June-Germans>, accessed May 15, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in Mid-Twentieth Century South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2003); Lisa Hazirjian, "Negotiating Poverty: Economic Oppression and Working-Class African American Politics in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, 1929-1969," (PhD diss., Duke University, 2003). FTA Local 10 was spawned by FTA Local 22 in Winston-Salem, where Black women workers staged a sit-down strike in June 1943 that led to union organization and a contract for workers at the giant R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. The FTA nationally and in state was a Left-led union, with leaders who were members of the Communist Party USA. See essay for "Operation Dixie," marker E-118, [www.ncmarkers.com](http://www.ncmarkers.com), accessed March 1, 2023.

work” law in 1947 intending to make it harder for unions to organize. In 1959, North Carolina’s all-white General Assembly took a step further by passing General Statute 95-98, outlawing collective bargaining for public employees, including Black municipal sanitation workers. These legal restrictions on union rights dovetailed the denial of African American voting rights in the South, reinforcing the colonial-like status of Black workers in the Black Belt.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of FTA and its 1940s “civil rights unionism” in eastern North Carolina, “Black voter registration remained an anomaly in Rocky Mount well into the 1960s,” according to historian Lisa Hazirjian. In 1960, African Americans led by Rev. George Dudley organized the Rocky Mount Voters and Improvement League that adopted direct action tactics such as boycotts of segregated businesses and made gains for voter registration and equal access to public spaces and employment. Rev. Dudley invited his friend Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King to speak at the Booker T. Washington High School in November 1962, where King delivered an early version of his “I Have A Dream” speech to an audience of 1,800 gathered in the school gymnasium. Uplifted by Dr. King’s visit, the Voters and Improvement League launched its initial civil rights action by boycotting and picketing the local segregated Ivy Room restaurant, on the busy U.S. 301 in downtown Rocky Mount, in the summer of 1963.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism*, 300-302; John K. (Yonni) Chapman, *Jim Crow 95-98: Why all university students, staff, and faculty should support The Repeal of General Statute 95-98* (Carrboro: Chapel Hill-Carrboro NAACP, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Lisa Hazirjian, “Negotiating Poverty,” 431; Charles McKinney, *Greater Freedom: The Evolution of the Civil Rights Struggle in Wilson, North Carolina* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010). In contrast to Rocky Mount, tobacco workers unions in Wilson facilitated black voter registration in the post-war years such that voters elected Black dentist G.K. Butterfield, father of future Congressman G.K. Butterfield, Jr., to city council in 1953; Hazirjian, “Negotiating Poverty,” 469.

The next year, in May 1964, Black minister Rev. James H. Costen, pastor of Mt. Pisgah United Presbyterian Church, ran for Rocky Mount city council from the predominately Black Ward 2. Lisa Hazirjian has noted that, “his candidacy provided the impetus for many of the city’s African Americans to register and cast their first votes.” However, the city had recently enacted an at-large voting system, whereby all voters in the city, at that time a white majority, could vote on who represented each ward, including the Black majority Ward 2. In spite of Costen’s receiving over 1,800 presumably Black votes, white optometrist David Stroud, an ally of the state’s leading segregationist I. Beverly Lake, won election as the Ward 2 councilman. According to Hazirjian, while Costen’s candidacy reflected an increase in Black voting participation, “the strong endorsement of segregationist candidates cautioned that a vocal white majority remained determined to defend their traditions.”<sup>31</sup>

Just two months after he challenged the white power structure by running for city council, Rev. Costen drew the attention of the local Ku Klux Klan when he brought in a church-sponsored group of Black and white young people to paint the small Presbyterian Church in nearby Elm City and teach about forty Black students at Vacation Bible School. Over two hundred-fifty KKK members from Nash and Wilson Counties converged on Elm City to stop the interracial efforts that coincided with “Freedom Summer” across the South. Governor Terry Sanford warned the Klan to halt its activities. Sanford sent in the Highway Patrol who

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<sup>31</sup> Hazirjian, “Negotiating Poverty,” 484-486. Rev. James H. Costen (1932-2003) left Rocky Mount in 1969 to head the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta for thirty years. The northern United Presbyterian Church USA elected Costen its national moderator in 1983. He facilitated the unification of the northern (multi-racial) denomination and the southern (white) Presbyterian Church US, divided since the Civil War, into today’s Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA).

intercepted two attempts to burn the church while the volunteers were painting and conducting the school.<sup>32</sup>

During the same summer of 1964, when the KKK as well as white business leaders in Rocky Mount objected to the integrated team of volunteers from the national United Presbyterian Church, Rocky Mount became the first city in the state to refuse an integrated team of community organizers from the Sanford supported North Carolina Fund (NC Fund). Business leaders rejected integrated housing or white volunteers staying with Black host families. A bank president claimed to have recruited an all-white group of student volunteers from the local North Carolina Wesleyan College to staff the community action program, instead of the interracial team sent by the Fund.<sup>33</sup>

By the summer of 1967, the Voters and Improvement League invited the NC Fund to dispatch an integrated team of college intern community organizers to Rocky Mount. These organizers “facilitated the emergence of working-class African Americans as a significant political force,” noted Hazirjian. The interns, mentored by NC Fund organizing coordinator and emerging Black Power advocate Howard Fuller, convened nine neighborhood organizations as the Consolidated Councils for Improvement (CCI). Fuller came to Rocky Mount and spoke to the Voters League in August 1967 in support of a more aggressive organizing project in the stiff-necked white

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<sup>32</sup> McKinney, *Greater Freedom*, 161-162; “New Elm City Arson Plot,” *Evening Telegram*, July 15, 1964, 2; David Cunningham, *Klansville, USA: The Rise and Fall of the Civil Rights-Era Ku Klux Klan*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Cunningham documents that North Carolina’s Ku Klux Klan claimed the largest state membership in the U.S. during the 1960s.

<sup>33</sup> Hazirjian, “Negotiating Poverty,” 496-501; Robert Korstad & James Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs: The North Carolina Fund and the Battle to End Poverty and Inequality in 1960s America*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2010), 130-131. N.C. Governor Sanford initiated the North Carolina Fund as a privately-funded statewide anti-poverty effort.

controlled city, known as a bastion of the right-wing, segregationist John Birch Society. Fuller quoted Frederick Douglass: “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.” He also pointed out that “Negroes are still slaves in North Carolina...operating on a system of taxation without representation,” referring to the lack of racially proportional voting districts. In an effort to advance local Black political initiatives yet deflect the violent stereotypes associated with “Black Power,” Rev. James Costen suggested the Voters League reclaim the slogan as “the power of Black” at the League’s seventh anniversary celebration in November 1967.<sup>34</sup>

In April 1968, following the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King in Memphis, a group of Black teachers returning from a Rocky Mount memorial service noticed the downtown Belk-Tyler’s store flying the American flag at full-staff, defying the national day of mourning. These teachers began a spontaneous silent boycott of the store that continued until the summer. Then the CCI, with the guidance of Fuller protégé and leading intern Thelma Miller, initiated a well-organized economic boycott and selective buying campaign targeting a number of downtown businesses for employment discrimination. Activists saw this boycott as a way to pressure city

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<sup>34</sup> Hazirjian, “Negotiating Poverty,” 519-520, 543-544.; R.D. Armstrong, “Fuller Speaks to Voters League,” *Evening Telegram*, August 29, 1967. R.D. Armstrong, “True Meaning of ‘Black Power’ Is Discussed,” *Evening Telegram*, November 26, 1967. Black community organizer Howard Fuller subsequently adopted Pan-Africanism, changed his name to Owusu Sadaukai, founded the Malcolm X Liberation University in Durham and Greensboro (1969-1973), and became a leader of the African Liberation Support Committee in 1972. Thereafter, Sadaukai turned to Marxist labor organizing and was elected business representative of Duke workers Local 77 of American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in Durham in 1974. Rocky Mount was the state headquarters of the John Birch Society. Local members included prominent doctors such as optometrist Dr. Lloyd Bailey, who made headlines in the 1968 election as a “faithless elector” when he was elected as an elector for the Republican candidate Richard Nixon but cast his electoral college vote for Independent segregationist George Wallace. See David S. Broder, “The Case of Dr. Bailey,” *Washington Post*, November 17, 2000; “Most of the Rocky Mount doctors belonged to the [John] Birch Society back in the ‘50s and ‘60s.” Dr. Salter Cochran, interview by Karen Kruse Thomas, April 12, 1997, R-0014, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/R-0014/R-0014.html> , accessed March 13, 2023.

government indirectly to address needs of low income Blacks. However, this working class action exposed a divide in the Black community, as Rev. Dudley and some middle class leaders declined to support the boycott as too radical or too confrontational toward the entrenched white power structure, which they knew would retaliate.

The boycott demanding businesses employ more Black workers began on August 12, 1968, and continued for three months. Some businesses such as Belk-Tyler, Burlington Industries, and Abbott Laboratories fired Black employees they had hired for participation in the boycott. Despite these reprisals, the neighborhood organizations stood fast and continued the campaign until November 17, resulting in modest gains in Black employment. Baldwins and Charles department store began to hire its first Black employees. Belk-Tyler and the Pepsi-Cola Bottling plant (owned by the city's mayor) hired a few more Black employees. Conservative Republican Congressman and fast-food business owner Jim Gardner hired one Black person to work the drive-thru at Hardee's. Three banks hired their first African American tellers. In addressing one of the demands of the boycott campaign, the City of Rocky Mount established a Human Relations Commission (HRC) and hired a Black man, Samuel Gray, to lead it. The city tasked Gray and the HRC with mediating racial issues in the city and later called upon it during the 1978 sanitation strike.<sup>35</sup>

In the 1970s, Blacks comprised more than forty percent of the city population yet lacked any representation on the city council due to the at-large voting system in which all the city's white

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<sup>35</sup> Hazirjian, "Negotiating Poverty," 544-555; Samuel Gray credited Thelma Miller (1944-2013) with leading the 1968 boycott campaign. Samuel Gray, telephone interview with James Wrenn, January 26, 2023; Samuel Gray, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 13, 2018, Sanitation Strike Daily for 121318.

majority voters could vote on the councilman to represent the only Black majority ward. Then in 1970, as if to retaliate against the boycott campaign, the all-white city council went one step further to block any chance of Blacks being elected by realigning districts to eliminate an “All-Negro Ward.” Blacks protested this move and lines were redrawn in 1972, restoring Ward 2 as majority Black. In May 1972, the white majority voters of the city elected Rev. George Dudley from Ward 2 as the first and only Black member on city council. This did not indicate a change of heart as much as a concession for limited Black representation on council. Indeed, many Black residents now saw Dudley as a moderate because he did not support the 1968 boycott.<sup>36</sup>

Even so, one Black councilman threatened the status quo. The following year, under the guise of balancing ward populations to meet the Supreme Court’s “one man, one vote” principle, conservative whites pushed through a new plan that would divide the 38,000 residents of the city into five wards, rather than seven: two on Edgecombe side and three on Nash side, with two seats at-large, instead of three Edgecombe and four Nash wards. All city voters would elect the council representatives for each ward seat as well as the at-large seats. Councilman Walter Mears voiced stiff opposition as this could result in five councilmen elected from Nash and only two from the Edgecombe side of town. Mears solicited citizen feedback, which overwhelmingly

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<sup>36</sup> Wayne Gray, “City Council Acts to Realign Wards on a Near-Equal Population Basis: No All Negro Ward Included in New Setup.” *Evening Telegram*, January 23, 1970; Bill Dixon, “New Ward Lines Are Approved By Rocky Mount City Council,” *Graphic* [Nashville, N.C.], March 2, 1972, 9: Rocky Mount population in 1970 census was 34,500; “Complete Results of City Election,” *Evening Telegram*, May 3, 1972, 1. In 1983, at least nine cities in North Carolina elected city councils through this racially discriminatory method, which Black voters challenged as a violation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as amended in 1982. Vickie Wiggins, “Electing City Council,” *Evening Telegram*, October 16, 1983, 4. Rocky Mount annexed white neighborhoods in Nash County to reduce Black voter ratio. Sanitation workers later reported annexations to Naomi Green, due to new collections added to their routes.

rejected the five ward proposal. Yet, the council approved the new plan by a vote of 4 to 3 in July 1973. For the next decade, Rev. Dudley remained the only Black on council.<sup>37</sup>

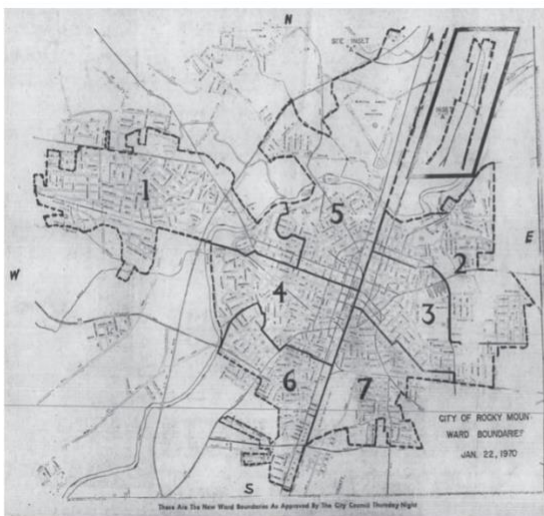
But one seat out of seven did not adequately represent the more than 17,000 Black residents in a city population close to 40,000. In July 1977, over 200 African Americans rallied to protest the white majority council's 6 to 1 vote to oust an outspoken Black, Clarence Wiggins, off the Rocky Mount school board. Protesters formed the Concerned Citizens Association (CCA) led by Rev. Thomas Walker, the twenty-nine year old pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. In February 1978, more than a hundred Black citizens, organized by the CCA under Rev. Walker and the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) under President Esmerelda Hawkins, rallied in the Rocky Mount council chambers demanding a racially proportioned "true" ward system for electing the city council. This meant that voters in each ward would choose their own representative, and that Black voters with forty percent of the population should have the chance of electing three out of seven councilors. Continuing to "stand firm" in pursuit of ward voting, the CCA retained the law firm of Charlotte civil rights activist Julius Chambers in June 1978, just a month before the sanitation strike. Rev. Walker said, "If this cannot be done through negotiation...we will take legal action."<sup>38</sup>

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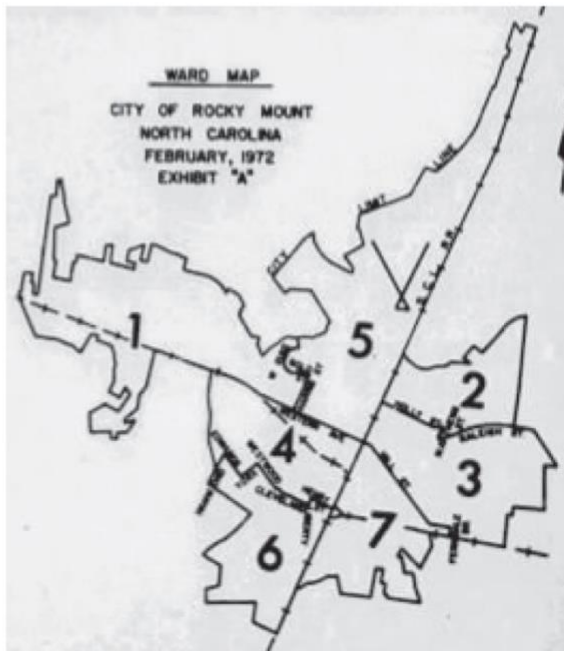
<sup>37</sup> Ronnie Smith, "Five Ward Council System Will Be Debated Tonight," *Evening Telegram*, March 26, 1972, 9; Ronnie Smith, "New Ward Lines Drawn," *Evening Telegram*, July 10, 1973, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Saravette Trotter, "RM Blacks Protest Ouster of Wiggins," *Graphic*, July 12, 1977, 1; Dudley, "Black Group Upset, Protests Ouster of Wiggins," *Evening Telegram*, July 12, 1977, 7; Dudley, "Blacks Seeking Election Change," *Evening Telegram*, February 14, 1978, 9; Trotter, "Blacks To Pursue Ward Voting," *Graphic*, June 15, 1978, 1; US Census, 1980, General Population Characteristics- North Carolina, Table 15, pages 35-17. Rev. Walker was born in 1948 and began his pastorate at Ebenezer Baptist Church in 1970 at age twenty-two. "Longtime pastor has no plans to step down," *Evening Telegram*, August 8, 2021. The NAACP and CCA unsuccessfully petitioned U.S. Justice Department challenging 36 annexations of predominately white areas by the cities over thirteen years as diluting the Black vote, in violation of the Voting Rights Act. Trotter, "Blacks To Pursue Ward Voting," *Graphic*, June 15, 1978, 1.

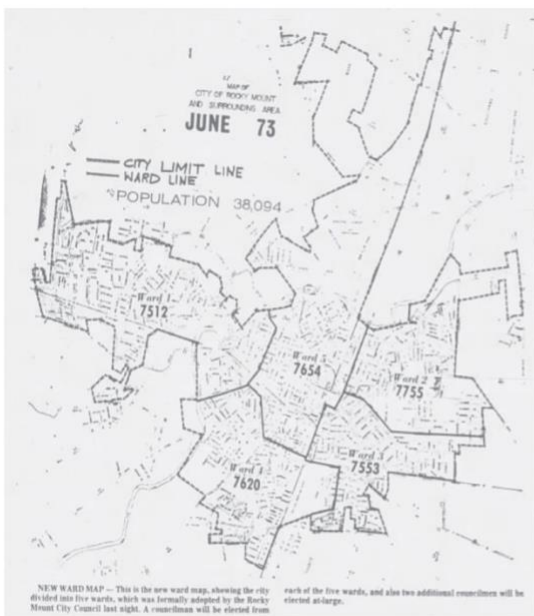
## Shifting Boundaries of the Ward 2



"No All Negro Ward Included in New Setup"  
 Rocky Mount *Evening Telegram*,  
 January 23, 1970, p. 1



"New Ward Lines Are Approved"  
*Nashville Graphic*,  
 March 2, 1972, p. 9



"New Ward Lines Adopted"  
 Rocky Mount *Evening Telegram*,  
 July 10, 1973, p. 9

**FIGURE 4:** Shifting Boundaries of the Ward 2

Meanwhile, the statewide Black freedom movement had coalesced around demanding exoneration for the Wilmington Ten. These were nine young Blacks and a white woman activist, led by the Rev. Ben Chavis of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice (CRJ), who were convicted and imprisoned for their role in a civil rights protest movement over school desegregation in Wilmington in 1971. The movement to free the Wilmington Ten, which gained international attention and projected the Ten as American political prisoners, profoundly shaped Black politics in North Carolina during the 1970s.<sup>39</sup>

On April 1, 1978, the North Carolina Coalition to Free the Wilmington Ten, including the African Liberation Support Committee (ALSC), the Workers Viewpoint Organization (WVO), and the CRJ, organized several thousand people to march on Governor Jim Hunt's mansion in Raleigh. The movement sought to mobilize mass pressure on Hunt to free and pardon the Wilmington Ten, after his public announcement refusing to do that. On May 13, 1978 in Rocky Mount, Shirley Pinnix, local chair of the ALSC, and Naomi Green, local chair of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), led a rally at the Greater Mount Hermon Baptist Church demanding freedom for the Wilmington Ten and support for liberation struggles in Southern Africa. SCLC state field director Golden Frinks proclaimed at the rally that "we want freedom now for the Wilmington Ten and if we don't get it, we are going to turn North Carolina upside down."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Kenneth Janken, *The Wilmington Ten: Violence, Injustice and the Rise of Black Politics in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: UNC Press, 2015), 183. N.C. Governor Jim Hunt reduced sentences of Wilmington Ten in 1978, allowing those imprisoned released by 1980. N.C. Governor Bev Perdue finally pardoned the Wilmington Ten in December 2012.

<sup>40</sup> R. D. Armstrong, "Small Turnout for Wilmington 10 Rally," *Evening Telegram*, May 14, 1978, 3; Janken, *The Wilmington Ten*, 157-163. Conveners named the group North Carolina Coalition to Free the Wilmington Ten. Co-chairs were Joyce Johnson (ALSC), Rev. Leon White (CRJ) and Jean Wagner (Women's International League for

Shirley Pinnix grew up in Greensboro's Morningside Homes project near the office of the Greensboro Association of Poor People (GAPP), where she met Howard Fuller, Nelson and Joyce Johnson in the late 1960s. After serving three years in state Women's Prison where drug rehab mentors radicalized her, she returned home in 1974 and followed the Johnsons into the ALSC and the WVO. Pinnix came to Nash and Edgecombe counties in 1977 to support the Peoples Coalition for Justice (PCJ) campaign in Whitakers, allowing the Piedmont-based WVO and ALSC to establish a presence in the eastern North Carolina Black Belt. In the fall of 1977, Pinnix moved with her three children from Greensboro east, first to Roanoke Rapids and then to Rocky Mount, to lead the ALSC in Nash and Edgecombe counties. Pinnix worked closely with Naomi Green and the two became the leading grassroots Black activists in Rocky Mount.<sup>41</sup>

Born in 1930, Naomi Green represented a Black working class activist tradition in Rocky Mount. For years, she had struggled for workers' rights, voting rights, and welfare rights in Rocky Mount and Edgecombe County. As a teenager, she assisted her parents, Wardell and Annie Mae Bynum, with organizing tobacco workers into Left-led Local 10 of the FTA-CIO. Her mother worked at the China American Tobacco plant where workers first voted for the FTA

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Peace & Freedom). Jean Wagner was the mother of WVO activist Lucy Wagner Lewis. WVO was a national communist organization with an active branch in North Carolina that emerged in 1976 from white and Black left groups in the state with roots in the anti-war and civil rights movements. ALSC, a national network organized in 1972, by 1976 fell under the leadership of the WVO in North Carolina. See James Wrenn, "Greensboro Massacre," *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, edited by Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas (New York: Garland, 1990), 279-280. See also Alkalimat, *Dialectics of Liberation*.

<sup>41</sup> Shirley Pinnix Richardson (1947-2021), interview by Sally Bermanzohn, August 1991, in author's possession; Richardson recalled drug rehab mentor Rev. John Mendez politicized her in prison, introducing her to the writings of Malcolm X and Mao Tse-tung. Mendez worked closely with Owusu Sadaukai (Howard Fuller) in the ALSC in Durham and the Duke Hospital union campaign; Rev. John Mendez, interview by Erica Ragan, October 21, 2021, UNCG-CC0082.18, <http://libreserach.uncg.edu/participants/jMendez>, accessed April 9, 2023; Elbert Richardson, husband of Shirley Pinnix Richardson, phone interview by James Wrenn, November 13, 2020, notes in author's possession; Workers Viewpoint Organization, "Whitakers Scrapbook" (1977), in author's possession. Lucy Lewis, email to James Wrenn, November 8, 2022, in author's possession.

union in 1946. Her father Wardell Bynum served as the president of Local 10, which included all FTA members in eastern North Carolina. She often recalled helping her father by driving workers to the polls to vote in the 1947 and 1948 elections and facing threats at gunpoint from whites. In 1967, Green along with her parents Wardell and Annie Bynum and her brother Wardell Bynum, Jr., took the lead in organizing the CCI's neighborhood council in their "Around the Y" community on the Edgecombe side of south Rocky Mount. They played active roles in the 1968 economic boycott of downtown businesses asserting "the power of Black."<sup>42</sup>

A mother of nine and welfare recipient herself, Green led the Edgecombe Welfare Rights Organization, a chapter of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), in protesting the removal of the Rocky Mount office of Edgecombe Social Services in 1976, forcing Rocky Mount welfare recipients who lacked transportation to travel fifteen miles to Tarboro to receive assistance. Historian Rhonda Williams has highlighted "welfare rights groups" as a "local manifestation of Black Power politics." In April 1978, Green led an SCLC picket of a local Food World grocery for racially discriminatory practices, two months prior to the sanitation strike.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Jean Pryor, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 14, 2018, Sanitation Strike Daily 121418, [www.youtu.be/XkelwRbhGZg](http://www.youtu.be/XkelwRbhGZg), accessed October 9, 2022; Lisa Hazirjian, "A Question of Ownership," 6-7; Lane Windham, "Greenhands: A History of Local 10 of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers of America in Greenville, N.C. in 1946 (Senior thesis, Duke University, 1991), in author's possession; Lisa Hazirjian, "Negotiating Poverty." Chapter 6 on FTA Local 10 in Rocky Mount and Chapter 8 on the Bynums in CCI and 1968 boycott, 527. "Homegoing Services for Mrs. Naomi Patricia Bynum Green," February 20, 1999, in author's possession. "Around the Y" community is historic Black working class neighborhood built up around the Atlantic Coast Line railroad shops and birthplace of legendary jazz musician Thelonious Monk (1917-1982).

<sup>43</sup> Frank Parrish, "Welfare Rights Group Is Opposed to Moving Office," *Evening Telegram*, March 2, 1976, 5; "SCLC Pickets Store, Charges Harassment," *Evening Telegram*, April 4, 1978, 9; Rhonda Williams, "Black Women and Black Power," *OAH Magazine of History*, v. 22, no. 3, (July 2008), 23.



**FIGURE 5:** Naomi Green and Edgecombe Welfare Rights Committee, 1976.  
*(Evening Telegram [Rocky Mount, N.C.], January 26, 1976)*

In terms of the labor movement, the sanitation workers strike occurred during a decade of labor upsurge across the state and nation. Beginning in 1974, North Carolina's workers captured national attention with union organizing at Duke Hospital in Durham and J.P. Stevens' textile mills in Roanoke Rapids, just forty-two miles north of Rocky Mount. The Stevens workers voted 1,685 to 1,448 to join the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) that August, then began a six year national effort to secure a collective bargaining agreement against company's unfair labor practices, stonewalling and refusal to recognize the union victory. The TWUA's Stevens campaign, immortalized in the 1979 motion picture *Norma Rae*, shaped working class and union consciousness in the state and region.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Mimi Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise: Portrait of Southern Textile Workers* (New York: Anchor Books, 1979); Joey Fink, "In Good Faith: Working Class Women, Feminism, and Religious Support in the Struggle to Organize J.P.

Workers in at least three plants in the Rocky Mount/Whitakers area joined the TWUA movement during the 1967-1977 decade. Workers at the Rocky Mount plant of Phillips Fibers voted 73 to 34 for the TWUA in 1967 and secured contracts as Local 1728 until 1977 when the plant closed. In December 1975, almost 1,000 mostly Black women workers at the American Enka plant in Whitakers voted for the TWUA by 516 to 387, called the biggest TWUA success in over a year since the election at Stevens. In the wake of the victory at Enka, workers at the Barcalounger plant in Rocky Mount (across the street from Phillips Fibers), including Whitakers resident Alexander Evans, began organizing for the TWUA in 1976. Evans' son Lloyd, who also worked at the plant, recalled, "we thought for sure we had the Union coming." In spite of a majority of the workers signing union cards, the campaign faltered under the company's anti-union tactics, described by one union organizer as "vicious." The company terminated Evans and other activists. Sensing support caving, TWUA withdrew its petition with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) for a union certification election. Though unfairly fired from his job, Evans never wavered from his staunch advocacy for unions and workers' rights.<sup>45</sup>

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Stevens Textile Workers in the Southern Piedmont, 1974 -1980." *Southern Spaces*, July 15, 2014, <https://southernspaces.org/2014>, accessed October 6, 2020; Tony Dunbar, "The Old South Triumphs at Duke," *Southern Changes*, v. 1, no. 9, 1979, <http://southernchanges.digital>, accessed October 6, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> "Enka Plant Votes to Go Union," *Evening Telegram*, December 24, 1975, 15; Janice Bellamy, interview by James Wrenn, June 15, 2022, notes in author's possession; Lloyd Evans, telephone interview by James Wrenn, October 11, 2022, notes in author's possession; Alexander Evans, interview by Kieran Taylor, July 7, 2003. U-0464, Southern Oral History Project (SOHP) Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; TWUA collection, Part 10 M86-019, Box 66, Part 11 M86-171, Box 124, Wisconsin Historical Society [WHSArch #351788]. Former TWUA/ACTWU education director Bruce Raynor, telephone interview by James Wrenn, November 14, 2022, notes in author's possession. Evans reached out to NAACP president Fred Belfield to assist him with filing an EEOC complaint for his unfair termination. Apparently no complaint was filed with the National Labor Relations Board. Fred Belfield, telephone interview by James Wrenn, January 7, 2023; Evans, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP. In reference to "vicious" anti-unionism in eastern North Carolina, American Enka refused to recognize the pro-union vote of the workers in Whitakers and closed the plant rather than negotiate. Enka workers testified to U.S. House Labor subcommittee hearings in Roanoke Rapids in August 1977 addressing "industrial stonewalling" against workers' rights. Tom Wicker, "Firings, Harassment, Collusion Used to Stop

Grassroots labor activism nevertheless continued in the Rocky Mount/Whitakers area. On May 24, 1978, fifteen Black truck drivers at Seaboard Foods, a wholesale food distributor in Rocky Mount, went on strike protesting racial discrimination, low pay, and unsafe working conditions. Strike leader Donnell Dubose confirmed for the local newspaper that all nineteen company truck drivers and warehouse workers were Black, and all mechanics and salesmen were white and earned higher pay. The Seaboard Foods truck drivers did not have a union. Instead, they called on support from the CCA and Rev. Walker. Walker assisted by attempting to meet and negotiate with Seaboard Foods president William Holmes. Holmes refused to talk with the workers when they came to discuss their grievances and instead fired them. The workers retained young Black attorney Quentin Sumner, who filed unfair labor practice charges against Seaboard Foods with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).<sup>46</sup>

Workers picketed Seaboard Foods on North Church Street for two weeks. Naomi Green of SCLC and Shirley Pinnix of ALSC joined the Seaboard truckers' picket line. Pinnix brought in supporting associates Lucy and Chris Lewis, representing the N.C. Trade Union Educational League (NC TUEL). The NC TUEL, led by former Duke Hospital worker Sally Bermanzohn, was providing support to state dockworkers in Morehead City, members of International Longshoremen Association (ILA), who went on strike beginning April 29. The dockworkers strike captured statewide attention with news headlines almost daily in until it ended on June 4.<sup>47</sup>

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Southern Unions," *New York Times*, August 12, 1977, reprinted in *AFL-CIO News* [Washington, D.C.], August 20, 1977.

<sup>46</sup> "Drivers Picketing Food Service Co.," *Evening Telegram*, May 25, 1978, 15; *Evening Telegram*, May 29, 1978, 9; "Negotiations Fail in RM Strike Case," *Graphic*, June 8, 1978, 10.

<sup>47</sup> Lucy Lewis, email to Jim Wrenn, November 8, 2022, in author's possession. On the initiative of WVO members, the N.C. chapter of the national Trade Union Educational League organized in March 1978 on the basis of worker organizing committees at Duke University and Hospital and four Cone Mills plants (White Oak and Revolution in

After two weeks, the Seaboard Foods strike produced no progress on the workers' grievances. Seaboard drivers, assisted by Rev. Walker and attorney Sumner, negotiated a return to work without retaliation on June 9. Of note, according to an NLRB report, all the striking workers were reinstated at the increased wage rate the company paid workers hired to replace them, a small but significant victory. Workers continued to pursue solutions for their complaints by appealing for community support at a June 17 rally at Metropolitan Baptist Church. The CCA considered organizing a boycott of Seaboard's customers to force Holmes to address his unfair labor practices. Noting the group also planned a "challenge to the present political system," Rev. Walker pointed to the racially unfair at-large voting for city council. Walker elaborated that the "problem" at Seaboard offered evidence of the "political machinery blocking opportunities for good jobs for Rocky Mount citizens, whether white or black." Later that year, the Seaboard Foods workers organized with the Teamsters Union. But their initial "wildcat" strike and support from community-based allies set an example for other local Black workers confronting unfair treatment, like the city sanitation workers.<sup>48</sup>

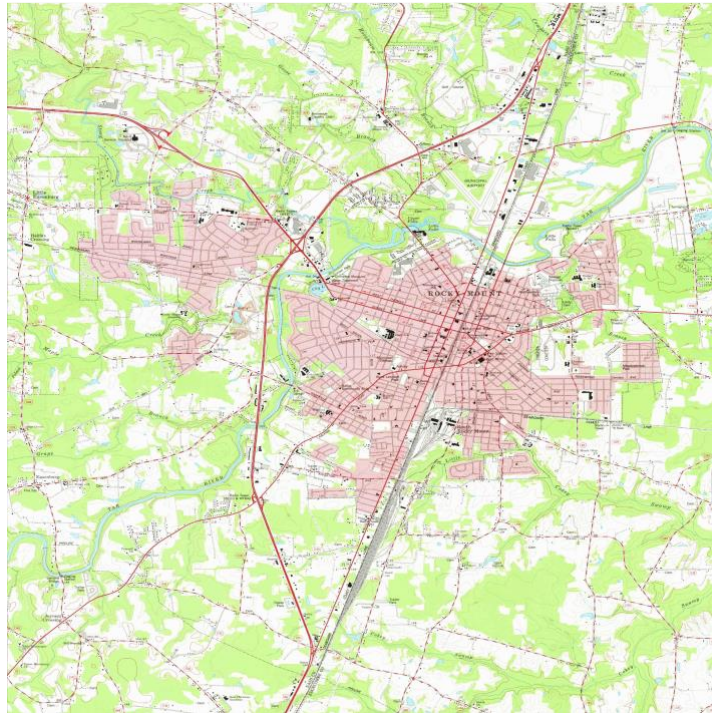
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Greensboro, Granite in Haw River and Eno in Hillsborough), Signe Waller, *Love and Revolution: A Political Memoir: A People's History of the Greensboro Massacre, Its Settings and Aftermath* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2002), 148-149, 156. "NC Ports Facing Strike As Bargaining Talk Fails," *Evening Telegram*, April 30, 1978, 3; "Dockworkers Strike, Hunt Criticized," *Evening Telegram*, May 2, 1978, 2; "Dockworkers Voting Today," *Evening Telegram*, June 3, 1978; "Dockworkers Have Approved A New Contract Agreement," *Evening Telegram*, June 4, 1978, 3. NC TUEL positioned itself to provide support for worker strikes across the state, following the victorious conclusion of the United Mine Workers national coal strike in March 1978. "The lesson Workers Viewpoint drew from the miners' strike was that an economic struggle could become more political as it progressed." Waller, *Love and Revolution*, 146.

<sup>48</sup> Rally at Metropolitan Church Notice, *Graphic*, June 15, 1978, 8; "Strikers Return...But Attorneys Plan Action," *The Graphic*, June 15, 1978, 1; R.D. Armstrong, "In And Around the Community," *Evening Telegram*, June 25, 1978, 2; "Concerned Citizens Back Truck Drivers," *Evening Telegram*, July 6, 1978, 13; "Group Upset with Seaboard," *Graphic*, July 6, 1978, 8, "Ruling by NLRB Clears Seaboard," July 27, 1978, *Graphic*, 1.



**FIGURE 6:** Rev. Thomas L. Walker.  
([www.ebenezerbaptistrm.org/about-us](http://www.ebenezerbaptistrm.org/about-us)  
accessed May 14, 2023)



**FIGURE 7:** City of Rocky Mount in 1978.  
(courtesy: Braswell Memorial Library, Rocky Mount, N.C.)

## Chapter Two: “We’re Going To Stand With Mr. Evans”

On June 20, 1978, the family of Irvin H. Pinnell in the predominately white, upper class west Rocky Mount neighborhood of Englewood called the city and accused sanitation worker Alexander Evans of “stealing” a suit of clothes left near the trash cans on his collection route. City management had frequently told workers they could pick up anything within five feet of the receptacles. In fact, the Rocky Mount *Evening Telegram* published an article in November 1977 featuring “Preacher Evans,” as his co-workers called him, and his “ministry” of picking up discarded items that could be reused and donating them to those in need.<sup>49</sup>

In a 2003 interview, Evans remembered, “On West View Park Drive, somebody had taken a suit and wrapped it in a packet and laid it on the step beside the trash can. Normally the city policy was anything within five feet of the can you could get it ...It was so neat the way they had it, just assuming they were giving you something. I picked it up and put it in the truck.” Receiving notification of the complaint the next day from his supervisor Ernest Taylor, Evans promptly returned the suit. However, Pinnell later called back to city hall and reported other items missing, such as two pair of trousers and three neckties, allegedly left for pickup by the dry cleaners. When asked by supervisor Taylor, Evans said he did not see or take any other items aside from the one suit.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> George Dudley, “He Feels Good When He Helps Other People,” *Evening Telegram*, November 25, 1977, 11. (See Appendix B). City Manager Bill Batchelor told the *Evening Telegram* the city had received five complaints of pickup of items by sanitation workers since November 1977 when this article was published. Batchelor said all these complaints had been denied. Millie Buchanan, “City Sanitation Workers Voice Concerns at Meeting,” *Evening Telegram*, July 10, 1978, p. 9.

<sup>50</sup> Evans, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 27.

Nevertheless, two weeks later on Wednesday, July 5, the police served Evans with an arrest warrant for misdemeanor larceny, alleging he did “unlawfully, willfully, steal, take, and carry away one white mans [sic] suit...”and other items “valued at \$200.” Evans later recalled that after work that day, July 5, sanitation department superintendent Herman Drake called him at home and asked him to come down to city hall and make a statement about the clothes. When Evans got there, he did not realize what was happening until “this guy reads me my rights” and asked him more questions. Evans told them he had nothing more to say. He signed for his own \$100 bond to keep from going to jail. Evans’ case was scheduled for District Court on July 27. City management suspended Evans while they investigated the incident.<sup>51</sup>



**FIGURE 8:** Irvin H. Pinnell, who accused Alexander Evans of “stealing” a suit left near his trash can in 1978, served as president of the local Civitan Club in 1983 when this photo appeared in the newspaper. (*Evening Telegram*, January 30, 1983, 23).

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<sup>51</sup> *The State v. Alexander Evans*. Warrant for Arrest, July 5, 1978, file #78-CRS-7143, Nash County Clerk of Superior Court. Complaint filed by “Officer Draughan RMPD” (Rocky Mount Police Department). Complaining resident was Irvin H. Pinnell (1919-2000), who resided at 220 West View Park Drive, on the far west, Nash side of the city, across the U.S. 301 bypass. According to Evans, Pinnell worked for a piping supply company in Rocky Mount. Alexander Evans, interview with Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 27-32.

Sanitation worker Leonard Giles recounted that he was riding from Tarboro to work the next day with his co-worker and friend William Moore. Moore said to him, “You know what happened to Alexander, don’t you? They are going to suspend him because this white lady said he stole a suit from her... They’re not doing Alexander right.” Moore told Giles, “I don’t have much education, but you’re educated and you understand a lot of stuff. We need to help Alexander because we might go out there tomorrow and somebody say the same thing about us, and they aren’t going to listen to us. They’re going to take the white people’s word for it.”<sup>52</sup>

These actions against Evans angered his co-workers who knew the “Preacher” was not a thief. Moore’s comment to Giles also suggests they shared a collective consciousness as workers who felt they could also face punishment based on similar accusations, in spite of management instructions. When he got to work that day, Giles questioned supervisor Taylor, an African American, about what had happened to Evans. Giles told Taylor, “when I came to work here, you said anything that was in and around the garbage can was considered trash. This is the policy I and the other guys have operated on. I always see guys getting stuff. Everybody needs to talk about it because it concerns everybody.”<sup>53</sup>

The workers then confronted their white managers, assistant superintendent Earl Johnson and sanitation superintendent Drake. Leonard Giles, who emerged as the workers’ leader, told the managers “if I go out there tomorrow and somebody says I stole something, you all aren’t going

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<sup>52</sup> Leonard Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, July 11, 2003, U-0465, Southern Oral History Program (SOHP) Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 31-33.

<sup>53</sup> Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 32.

to give me a chance to say anything...you all are going to take their word for it...I can't work like that.. We're going to stand with Mr. Evans until he gets his stuff straight."<sup>54</sup>

Naomi Green of the local SCLC was the first person to come up on "the hill," what workers called the sanitation incinerator site off Atlantic Avenue, to offer support the workers on Friday, July 7. Someone had told Green about the arrest and suspension of Evans and she sought out workers to learn their side of the story. Giles recalled Green telling them, "I'm so glad to see somebody stand up against the city of Rocky Mount." Meanwhile, Alexander Evans reached out to Rev. Thomas Walker of the Concerned Citizens Association (CCA). Evans and Walker knew each other from local gospel singing. Walker told Evans he would call sanitation assistant superintendent Johnson. Walker also called assistant city manager Peter Varney on July 7 to protest the unfair treatment of Evans.<sup>55</sup>

Giles recounted when he first raised questions about Evans' unfair treatment, the managers brushed him off, saying that it was not his concern. So he, Evans, William Moore, and a few other workers went to talk with Samuel Gray, the Rocky Mount Human Relations director. Giles said, "...he's supposed to be able to look out for us." The creation of the Rocky Mount Human Relations Commission had resulted directly of the 1968 economic boycott and selective buying campaign, and tasked with mediating and resolving racial issues in the city as well as Nash and Edgecombe counties. Giles recalled "we went down there and talked to him...he was telling us he understood what's going on...he was going to support us...'I'll be up there in the morning to

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<sup>54</sup> Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP.

<sup>55</sup> Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, p. 34; Millie Buchanan, "City Sanitation Workers Voice Concerns at Meeting," *Evening Telegram*, July 10, 1978, p. 9; Evans, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, p. 28; Rev. Thomas Walker to Whom It May Concern, August 9, 1978, file #78-CRS-7143, Nash County Clerk of Superior Court.

get everything straight.’ But when he came up there that morning, he had done a hundred and eighty-degree turn...he started shucking and jiving.” Workers realized they could not depend on Gray to “get everything straight.”<sup>56</sup>

On Monday, July 10, sanitation workers refused to begin work until meeting with City Manager William “Bill” Batchelor, where they demanded that authorities dismiss all charges against Evans. Cal Mobley of the SCLC notified area media that sanitation workers had begun a work stoppage in protest of Evans’ arrest and suspension. CCA leader Rev. Thomas Walker came to the sanitation site in support when the workers met with the city manager. In an effort to diminish the workers’ action, City Manager Batchelor told the press: “We do not have a strike. We had a meeting with our employees.” He said the workers wanted an understanding of what items could be picked up. After meeting with the city manager, workers started to work by mid-day. Batchelor reinstated Evans after two days suspension, but transferred him to the Parks and Recreation Department. Batchelor told the newspaper he had not determined whether Evans’ reinstatement would include pay for the two days suspended. Batchelor’s consideration of paying Evans for the two days suspension indicated he felt pressure from the workers’ actions.<sup>57</sup>

The next day, workers refused to start work a second time until meeting again with City Manager Batchelor to insist that the city drop the charges against Evans and issue a formal apology to Evans and the workers. Batchelor once again declined to intervene to dismiss larceny

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<sup>56</sup> Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, p. 33.

<sup>57</sup> Buchanan, “City Sanitation Workers Voice Concerns at Meeting,” *Evening Telegram*, July 10, 1978, p. 9; William Hill “Bill” Batchelor (1931-2017) served as Rocky Mount city manager from 1960 to 1995; he was a 1947 graduate of Rocky Mount High School and a 1953 civil engineering graduate of NC State. <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/newsobserver/name/william-batchelor-obituary?pid=186083789> accessed August 3, 2021.

charges against Evans. Workers began work about mid-day. That evening they met with CCA leaders and authorized a committee of the CCA to meet with the city on their behalf. One worker stated: “We will strike again if need be,” if the city did not drop charges against Evans and transfer him back to his job in the sanitation department. The CCA announced in the newspaper a special called meeting on Thursday, at the Morning Star Disciples of Christ Church.<sup>58</sup>

On Friday, July 14, the day after that gathering, a delegation including CCA Chair Rev. Thomas Walker and CCA Vice-chair Rev. Lloyd Morris met with City Manager Batchelor demanding exoneration of Evans and an apology. CCA told the press the next day that they felt completely dissatisfied with what Batchelor told them. According to the CCA, Batchelor “..was going to do nothing about clearing Evans, in spite of flimsy evidence.” Furthermore, the CCA contended that Irvin Pinnell, the complaining resident, had called Batchelor and offered to get police to drop charges, and the city manager had rejected the suggestion as “ill-advisable.” In response to Batchelor’s refusal to take further action to dismiss the charges against Evans, the CCA leaders announced plans to meet with Rocky Mount Mayor Fred Turnage on Monday. Beyond that, they pledged “if need be, massive protest demonstrations also.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> “Sanitation Workers, Batchelor Meet Again To Discuss Concerns,” and “The City Beat,” *Evening Telegram*, July 11, 1978; “DA Backs City’s Role,” *Graphic*, July 18, 1978, 1.

<sup>59</sup> “Dissatisfied: Group Supporting Fired City Worker,” *Evening Telegram*, July 15, 1978. On CCA delegation, see Millie Buchanan, “Sanitation Workers Explain Job Walkouts,” *Evening Telegram*, July 27, 1978, 8, and Stan Hollowell, “Sanitation Workers Stand Fast,” *Evening Telegram*, July 28, 1978, 10. Rev. Lloyd Morris served as pastor of Mt. Pisgah United Presbyterian Church, succeeding Rev. Costen. Other CCA leaders included Rev. Elbert Lee (1934-2016) of North End Baptist, Rev. Johnnie O. Thorne (1931-1993) of Greater Mount Herman Baptist, and Marcellus Miller (1916-2000), a member at Mount Zion First Baptist. Fred Turnage (1936-2011) served as Rocky Mount mayor from 1973 to 2007. When he was elected in 1973, Turnage became the youngest mayor in Rocky Mount history. Ronnie Smith, “Youth Proves To Be No Handicap To Rocky Mount’s Youngest Mayor,” *Evening Telegram*, September 20, 1974, 11. “Longtime Rocky Mount booster dies after battle with pancreatic cancer,” *Evening Telegram*, August 7, 2011, 8.

The CCA committee met with Mayor Turnage, along with City Manager Batchelor and Human Relations Director Sam Gray, in the mayor's office on Monday, July 17. At the meeting, Turnage stated the city's position that only the District Attorney, Howard Boney, had authority to drop the charges against Evans. Evans remembered that Boney told him, "These folks don't have anything on you... There isn't anything that will go to trial." Evans felt "everything would be okay." Yet on the same day the CCA met with the mayor, District Attorney Boney told the *Nashville Graphic* that "he agrees that city officials should not seek to have the charges dropped and that so far no one else has shown him any reason why the case should not proceed through normal judicial channels." In spite of these statements, after the meeting with Turnage and Batchelor, Rev. Walker told the press "we were pleased with the outcome" and would say more after convening with the workers the next day.<sup>60</sup>

On Wednesday, July 19, Rev. Walker informed the press that, subject to the consent of the complaining resident Pinnell, Human Relations Director Sam Gray would speak with the arresting Officer Vernon L. Draughan, who was on vacation that week, to request him to ask District Attorney Boney to drop the charges. Rev. Walker also announced the postponement of plans to picket city hall in order "to see what happens." Clearly, the CCA leaders expected some concessions after their private discussions with city officials. Finally, Rev. Walker said city representatives asked the group to give them until Tuesday, July 25, to resolve the matter, the day workers threatened to strike if Evans was not exonerated. By contrast, City Manager Batchelor denied the city had made any agreement with the CCA. Meanwhile, Gray said that the

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<sup>60</sup> "DA Backs City's Role," *Graphic*, July 18, 1978, 1; Alexander Evans, interview with Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 33.

Human Relations department was “involved in trying to resolve the differences” between the city and the workers, but would not commit to any specific proposal.<sup>61</sup>

The CCA committee went back to city hall on Thursday, July 20, and met again with Batchelor, Turnage and Gray. The substance of this meeting later became the source of much debate. CCA leaders told workers that evening that city officials assured them that Gray would speak with police officer Draughan when he returned from vacation and get the charges dropped by Monday, July 24 at 4:30pm, prior to Evans’ July 27 court date. However, after the deadline to get the charges dropped passed, workers learned the charges against Evans’ court appearance remained set for July 27.<sup>62</sup>

Leonard Giles and his colleagues faced a pivotal Tuesday morning decision as they gathered “on the hill” before starting work. CCA leaders Rev. Walker had gone to Montgomery, Alabama, and Rev. Morris had not returned from Charlotte. After two weeks of back and forth, and allowing the city time to resolve the matter, workers would wait no longer. Giles told the managers, “Since you all changed your minds, we can’t depend on you all. As of this moment we are officially on strike.” As Giles began to walk away from the sanitation site, he received a phone call from Rev. Walker in Montgomery. “I begged you before I left for you all not to do anything until I got back,” Walker said. Giles replied, “Rev. Walker, you’re five minutes too late because we just walked out on strike.” Thirty-six Black employees stopped working that day.

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<sup>61</sup> “HR Department Trying to Settle Controversy,” *Graphic*, July 20, 1978. Vernon “Buck” Lee Draughon (1929-2001), served over 30 years as a Rocky Mount police officer and was a “well known” local historian, publishing three books on Rocky Mount, Edgecombe and Nash County history trivia. *Rocky Mount Telegram*, August 8, 2001.

<sup>62</sup> David Guth, “Garbage workers fired in walkout,” *News & Observer* [Raleigh, NC], July 26, 1978, 24; “Sanitation Employees Are Fired,” *Graphic*, July 25, 1978, 1; *Graphic*, July 27, 1978, 1.

Batchelor later claimed he attempted arrange a meeting with the workers that morning, but the workers declined. Demonstrating once again the local white power structure's intransigence, Batchelor fired the workers who refused to begin trash collection that day. After two brief work stoppages earlier in the month, thus began the so-called "third walkout."<sup>63</sup>

This decisive action by Giles and his co-workers, in the absence of CCA leaders Walker and Morris, reflected the resolve of Giles, Evans, the sanitation workers and community activists, specifically Naomi Green, Shirley Pinnix as well as Lucy Lewis, who supported the walkout. Later on, Giles addressed accusations that "outside influences" such as Green, Pinnix, and Lewis instigated the strike. "We sort of caught the city off guard because they had never had to deal with this before. Nobody called the strike but us, the workers. Nobody. We called the strike, and it just kind of blew them away."<sup>64</sup>

The willingness of workers to take action on behalf of Evans stemmed from his leadership in the Black community. Born in 1934 in neighboring Halifax County, Alexander Evans lived in the African American community of Bloomer Hill in Nash County, just outside of the Whitakers town limits. Evans served as a community leader, secretary-treasurer of the Bloomer Hill Water Association, and superintendent of the Bloomer Hill Sunday School that met weekly at the Community Center. Bloomer Hill treasured its history as an independent Black community with various expressions of self-determination. Black residents of Bloomer Hill owned their land and resisted annexation into the white minority-controlled town of Whitakers. Several other Bloomer

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<sup>63</sup> Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor (SOHP), 35-36; Buchanan, *Evening Telegram*, July 27, 1978, 1; *Graphic*, July 25, 1978, 1; *Graphic*, July 27, 1978, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor (SOHP), 54.

Hill and Whitakers residents also worked in the Rocky Mount Sanitation Department along with Evans. Moreover, Evans himself had a history of labor activism at the city's Barcalounger plant, where managers had most likely fired him for his leadership of the 1976 union organizing campaign. He got a job with the city Sanitation Department the next year.<sup>65</sup>

While working for the City of Rocky Mount, Evans had gained the respect of his co-workers by leading them in a morning prayer each day as they gathered in the break room before work began. Willie Moody recalled that Evans relieved his anxiety about working on the back of the trash truck with "the prayer thing" before work. Evans' prayer meetings replaced the workers' gambling sessions that had previously occupied their pre-work time. For years, Evans sang and played guitar with a gospel quartet popular in the area called "The Spiritual Echoes." Workers nicknamed Evans "Preacher Man," and saw his practice of picking up discarded items to give to the needy as part of his Christian ministry. Co-workers English Edmondson and his twin brother Rudolph Edmondson also knew of Evans' Christian ministry from living near him in Whitakers. Knowing Evans was no thief, his co-workers felt that if the white power structure could convict "Preacher" Evans of larceny, then any one of them could face false accusations and disciplinary treatment. The city's unfair dealing with Evans touched them so deeply that they willingly put their jobs on the line in solidarity with him.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Evans, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 13-18, 57; Troy Fiesinger, "The Road to Self-Determination: Bloomer Hill, North Carolina," (Senior thesis, Duke University, 1991), in author's possession. Bloomer Hill originated from a land tract that the previous white owner sold off in lots specifically to Blacks in the late 1940s. The Bloomer Hill Community Association established its community center in a former school house in 1958. Other Bloomer Hill and Whitakers area residents working as Rocky Mount sanitation workers included Roosevelt Pittman, English Edmondson, Rudolph Edmondson.

<sup>66</sup> Dudley, *Evening Telegram*, November 25, 1977, 11; Buchanan, *Evening Telegram*, August 15, 1978, 9; "the prayer thing," Willie Moody, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 19, 2018, Sanitation Strike Daily for 121918, <https://youtu.be/xrcl4p99hOk>, accessed October 9, 2022; English Edmondson, interview by Tameka

The decision to strike also reflected the determination of Leonard Giles and the experiences that had shaped him up to that moment on July 25. Born in 1947, Giles grew up in Black majority Edgecombe's county seat of Tarboro, on the east side of Panola Street that divided the town's Black from white neighborhoods. After graduation from all-Black Pattillo High School in 1967, he entered the U.S. Air Force and deployed to Viet Nam. Giles observed the poverty of the Vietnamese people and asked why was he fighting in their country when he did not have freedom back home. He also suffered racist treatment from white soldiers in the U.S. military and returned from Viet Nam and the Air Force with a changed perspective. "When I came from Viet Nam, I was a very angry man. I was angry and frustrated...why is it that Black people always seem to behind the eight ball. No matter what we do, we just can't seem to break through the ice...because there is a whole system that is designed to keep that from happening."<sup>67</sup>

After his return, Giles travelled with a friend he met in the Air Force to the town of North Fork, a Black community in McDowell County, West Virginia, in the coal rich southern part of the state. He worked for over a year in a coal mine owned by U.S. Steel in nearby Welch, under a contract with the United Mine Workers of America. Giles called the UMWA "...the strongest union in the country. It was evident because whenever the workers' rights were in jeopardy and they felt there was a lot of safety issues that weren't addressed, they would call strikes." Giles' experience in UMWA strike actions influenced his stance when he saw injustice on the job in Rocky Mount. "Just from being part of the union and working in the coalmines...I've seen some

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Kenan-Norman, December 13, 2018, Sanitation Strike Daily for 121318, <https://youtu.be/5TZH8XPmnv4> , accessed October 9, 2022.

<sup>67</sup> Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 58.

stuff that gave me faith...I learned from them that all the union does is try to make it better for workers.”<sup>68</sup>

Beyond his experience of union solidarity among Black and white coal miners, Giles lived in the towns of Keystone and North Fork, both with a history of Black empowerment. McDowell County has been called the “Free State of McDowell,” to describe the Black political and economic power in the county. Local historian Larry Scott Deaner labeled the county itself the “Free State of McDowell” to capture Black political and economic power there. Residents of Keystone and neighboring North Fork had acquired extensive amounts of land ownership and used the independence of ownership conferred to form social organizations and political alliances. Deaner argued that “Keystone was the cultural capital of the ‘Free State of McDowell’ and hearth for the African American civil rights movement in southern West Virginia.”<sup>69</sup>

The independent action by sanitation workers also points to internal class-based divisions within Rocky Mount’s Black community, as previously described by Lisa Hazirjian. Instead of relying on middle class leaders like CCA’s Rev. Walker, for example, Giles cited grassroots activist Naomi Green as the workers’ most important ally, who advised them to stick together in whatever they would do and promised her support. Giles testified, “She was very encouraging. She didn’t have any self-serving [motive], none...She stuck with us to the end.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 1, 22-27.

<sup>69</sup> Larry Scott Deaner, “Home in the McDowell County Coalfields: The African-American Population of Keystone, West Virginia,” masters’ thesis, Ohio University, 2004.  
[http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?ac\\_num=ohiou1089820789](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?ac_num=ohiou1089820789).

<sup>70</sup> Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 48; Hazirjian, “Negotiating Poverty;” Hazirjian, “A Question of Ownership.”

Alongside Naomi Green, Shirley Pinnix also advised Evans and the sanitation workers. Giles recalled, “Shirley was a great inspiration...She stuck with us, too. Shirley was very supportive, helped us put things together...She helped me to see what we were doing in the [larger]



**FIGURE 9:** Shirley Pinnix. Left: Pinnix in Peoples Coalition for Justice protest at Nashville, N.C., 1977. Right: Pinnix at PCJ People’s Trial (standing at rear of room), Bloomer Hill Community Center, Whitakers, N.C., September 1977. (WVO, *Whitakers Scrapbook I*, 34, 35.)

context of...a lot of other stuff.” As a Workers Viewpoint Organization (WVO) and African Liberation Support Committee (ALSC) activist, Pinnix helped Giles in particular see the Rocky Mount strike in the larger context of labor and Black freedom struggles in North Carolina and shared with him the WVO’s national newspaper *Workers Viewpoint*. She linked Black radical activism in the Piedmont with eastern parts of the state. Evans also agreed about Pinnix’s

contribution to the workers' strike and what he called "The Black Coalition," referring to the WVO, ALSC and the NC TUEL, represented locally by Lucy and Chris Lewis.<sup>71</sup>

White activists Lucy and Chris Lewis represented the NC TUEL in Rocky Mount and Roanoke Rapids. They played key roles in the radical network that stretched from the Piedmont into the hostile, racist and anti-union Down East. Born in 1951, white Chapel Hill native Lucy Wagner entered Duke University in 1969, but quit after a year to work with Quakers and the American Friends Service Committee in the movement against the Vietnam War. In 1974, she joined other politically active former Duke students in organizing the Durham Health Collective (DHC) to address issues of health care and health care workers. The DHC activists began to study labor history and Marxism, influenced by Owusu Sadaukai (formerly Howard Fuller) of the ALSC, who then served as the business representative of Duke workers AFSCME Local 77. As the union of Duke campus and housekeeping workers, Local 77 began a union organizing campaign among workers at Duke Hospital. Wagner went to work at Duke Hospital in 1974 along with Sally Bermanzohn and other white activists of the DHC and Black activists of the ALSC. She married DHC activist Chris Lewis in 1976.<sup>72</sup>

Lucy Lewis played an active role on the AFSCME Local 77 union organizing committee that took on the 2,000 workers at Duke Hospital in a campaign that attracted national attention. The effort at Duke Hospital reflected a leftist, grassroots approach linking labor rights with civil rights and Black Power that contrasted with the traditional AFL-CIO organizing of the TWUA in

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<sup>71</sup> Leonard Giles and Alexander Evans in Giles interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 35, 49-50; Lucy Lewis, email to James Wrenn, November 8, 2022, in author's possession; Leonard Giles, telephone interview by James Wrenn, March 29, 2023, notes in author's possession.

<sup>72</sup> Signe Waller, *Love and Revolution*, 70-72.

the Stevens campaign during this same time period. Local 77 lost a very close election for the hospital workers in November 1976. By the end of the year, DHC (renamed the Durham Organizing Committee) and ALSC activists merged into the multiracial WVO. In 1977, Lucy and Chris Lewis left Durham and along with Shirley Pinnix of Greensboro moved to Roanoke Rapids to advance the work of WVO, ALSC and the NC TUEL in eastern North Carolina.<sup>73</sup>

Decades later, Giles and Evans explicitly discussed the internal struggle “within the organizations about which direction this thing was going and who was going to call the shots.” Giles said Rev. Walker was “trying to take us in a direction that he saw for us to go in...I also saw the other organizations and their main concern was us...our well-being and how we were going to survive in that.” The radical activist women, Naomi Green, Shirley Pinnix and Lucy Lewis, in contrast to Walker, continued to advise the workers to stay focused on Evans’ exoneration, the primary reason why they were on strike. “Mrs. Green, Shirley and Lucy kept things on track, otherwise it would have been derailed,” Giles later recounted. “Naomi Green had a great influence on what we were doing. She was the glue. Nobody could separate the workers from Mrs. Green, Shirley and Lucy.” Giles had the impression that Walker “wanted to be like a ‘pawnbroker’ between us and the city,” using his position to negotiate with the city’s white power structure. In spite of these class tensions, once Giles called the strike the CCA ministers publicly fell into line and joined a united front led by the workers. Yet, this tension between Rev.

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<sup>73</sup> Signe Waller, *Love and Revolution*, 70-72. In the 1976 NLRB election for Duke hospital workers, the union lost 743 to 684. Karen Sacks, *Caring By the Hour: Women, Work and Organizing at Duke Medical Center* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Lucy Lewis, email to James Wrenn, November 8, 2022. Shirley Pinnix and her children first moved to Roanoke Rapids for less than a year, then due to the racism she experienced there, she moved to Rocky Mount. Lucy and Chris Lewis remained in Roanoke Rapids to be close to the J.P. Stevens campaign. Shirley Pinnix Richardson, interview by Sally Benmanzohn; Lucy Lewis, email to James Wrenn, April 10, 2023.

Walker and the workers, as to who would lead, continued behind the scenes throughout the campaign, even as they maintained public unity.<sup>74</sup>

The striking workers and their allies convened a mass meeting of several hundred community supporters on Wednesday, July 26, at Rev. Elbert Lee's North End Missionary Baptist Church to explain why they walked out. There, Evans said, "Maybe we were misinformed or we misunderstood something in last Thursday night's meeting, but we did understand that by 4:30 p.m. Monday that the charges would be dropped against me. I feel like an injustice has been done to me, and the whole sanitation department was really accused." One of the striking workers, Rev. English Edmondson, affirmed that when workers learned Monday night that the case had not been dismissed, they "knew we had been lied to" and decided to strike.<sup>75</sup>

Rev. Walker, speaking to the press two days later from Alabama, disputed the understanding that city officials had promised to drop the charges. "[Turnage and Batchelor] at no time indicated that they would use any kind of influence with the district attorney to get the charges dropped," said Walker, seeming to contradict what workers heard him say at the Thursday (July 20) evening meeting. "My advice to the workers upon hearing this [that charges were not dropped] was not to strike, but somehow they chose to do so." However, Rev. Lloyd Morris, the CCA vice-chair who attended the Wednesday mass meeting at North End, countered Walker by commenting, "it was absolutely certain that full assurances had been given that the matter would

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<sup>74</sup> Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 50-51; Leonard Giles, telephone interview with James Wrenn, February 1, 2023, notes in author's possession. Lucy Lewis was living in Roanoke Rapids, working at Halifax Memorial Hospital, and recalls taking the bus to Rocky Mount daily after work to meet and strategize with Green, Pinnix, and Giles during the strike. She also consulted regularly with WVO and NC TUEL leadership (Sally Bermanzohn) in Durham. Lucy Lewis, email to James Wrenn, November 8, 2022, in author's possession.

<sup>75</sup> Buchanan, *Evening Telegram*, July 27, 1978, 1; *Graphic*, July 27, 1978, 1.

be settled by Monday.” Morris also called Walker and told him to refrain from making any statements to the press until he returned to town to avoid creating further confusion. Meanwhile, instead of addressing the demands of the striking workers, the district attorney rescheduled Evans’s court date to August 3, because Evans did not appear in court on July 27, due to a “misunderstanding.”<sup>76</sup>

On the third day of the strike, leader Leonard Giles told the press, “We as sanitation workers demand an apology because our dignity and pride have been hurt, and all charges [against Evans] must be dropped.” Giles insisted that Evans was not a thief. “He was insulted because he was doing his job the way he was told to do it.” He further stated that city management may have targeted Evans because he had previously challenged supervisors in the sanitation department. “During the winter when we had real bad weather, we said we couldn’t go out and work. Evans, myself and a couple of others stood up and said we couldn’t do it.”<sup>77</sup>

Evans had also led sanitation workers in objecting to the city’s mandate that employees donate a day’s pay to United Way. Evans recalled, “The guys told me, ‘We’ve got to pay a day’s work.’ I said ‘No, you don’t have to pay a day’s work...United Fund is a charity. People can’t make you pay charity...That’s a freewill thing...They can’t make you give what they want you to give.’” “Evans noted how the supervisors rode up and down the street behind the sanitation trucks demanding that workers agree to pay a day’s pay to United Way. He told his supervisor, Ernest Taylor, “Mr. Taylor, do you realize that is wrong? United Fund is a charity...you can’t make people pay charity.” City management expected all employees to give a day’s pay to

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<sup>76</sup> Hollowell, *Evening Telegram*, July 28, 1978, 10.

<sup>77</sup> Hollowell, *Evening Telegram*, July 28, 1978, 1.

United Way and for the most part they did, but due to Evans and Giles, the sanitation workers resisted, and this refusal did not sit well with City Manager Batchelor.<sup>78</sup>

Former Human Relations Director Samuel Gray later reflected on the 1978 strike. While the workers thought he had betrayed their trust and failed to do what he promised to resolve the issues at the time, he did provide insight into the city's response. Gray said that Batchelor was upset with the sanitation workers for raising so many concerns. The growing complaints coincided with Leonard Giles and Alexander Evans coming to work in sanitation in February 1976 and February 1977, respectively. Giles recounted that he and Evans had encouraged the workers to stand up against the mistreatment and unfair working conditions they had been experiencing as Black sanitation workers, looked down upon by white society as lowly "garbage workers." Because Black workers displayed a new attitude, one that reflected an intent to determine their own best interests and act accordingly, Batchelor and others saw a larger threat to their authority.<sup>79</sup>

Gray had met with sanitation workers about their concerns before the strike. Such included unrestrained dogs in the yards on their collection routes and their safety riding on the back of garbage trucks, which left them vulnerable to being rear ended by vehicles or slipping off the back of the trucks in icy weather. They also expressed apprehension about how the white managers, Herman Drake and Earl Johnson, talked abusively to the Black workers, and even talked down to the Black supervisor Ernest Taylor. "They [Drake and Johnson] talked to him

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<sup>78</sup> Evans, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 26-27.

<sup>79</sup> Samuel Gray, telephone interview by James Wrenn, January 16, 2023, notes in author's possession; Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 36-37,57.

[Taylor] any kind of way,” Giles remembered. Evans and Giles said that before they came to work for the city, Drake had earned a reputation because he had kicked some of the workers. Sam Gray later described Drake “as a rascal” and took issue with “how he [Drake] saw Blacks in general,” as well as Batchelor. Other underlying issues included low wages. The city could have addressed the workers’ reasonable concerns, Gray noted, but did not do so until after the strike. He also acknowledged that Batchelor could have easily resolved the complaint against Evans and compensated the homeowner. But Gray said Batchelor told him, “It is out of my hands,” to which Gray responded, “But you are the city manager!” Thus, according to Gray, Batchelor wanted to make an example of Evans to silence additional potential protest by Black workers.<sup>80</sup>

Batchelor soon found the workers would not be silenced. Several hours of meetings between city officials, CCA leaders, and worker representatives on Thursday, July 27, produced no results. Marcellus Miller, a CCA spokesperson, reported that he asked Batchelor if he would re-hire the workers if they returned to work, but did not receive any commitment from him. With no resolution in sight, Giles announced a march and rally in support of the fired workers for Sunday, July 30. Naomi Green along with workers Alexander Evans, English Edmondson, and Walter Bryant, Jr., applied for the march permit, while Green and sanitation workers Bryant,

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<sup>80</sup> Samuel Gray, Interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 13, 2018, Sanitation Strike Daily 121318, <https://youtu.be/XkelwRbhGZg>, accessed January 16, 2023. Samuel Gray, telephone interview by James Wrenn, January 16, 2023, notes in author’s possession; Samuel Gray, telephone interview by James Wrenn, January 26, 2023, notes in author’s possession; Giles interview SOHP, pp. 37, 54; Leonard Giles, telephone interview by James Wrenn, January 24, 2023, notes in author’s possession. Later in 1978, Herman Drake (1913-1980) retired from the City of Rocky Mount after forty years in the sanitation department. Ironically, the NC chapter of American Solid Waste Association has since sponsored an annual “Herman Drake Award” with a monetary gift and plaque to recognize the non-supervisory employee statewide who “best exemplifies the character and contributions of Mr. Drake.” <http://northcarolina.apwa.net/file/awards-scholarships>, accessed January 8, 2023. Brooks Skinner, “Drake Recalls Long Career,” *Evening Telegram*, January 8, 1979, 9; “Herman Drake Dies at Age 66,” *Evening Telegram*, January 8, 1980, 12.

Maceo Jones, and Joseph Pierce requested a permit to picket the sanitation site on Atlantic Avenue.<sup>81</sup>

Alexander Evans still held his job in the Parks and Recreation Department when workers launched the strike on July 25. Participating workers walked out from the sanitation site on “the hill”, crossed Atlantic Avenue and gathered in Tom Stith Park. As Evans rode by in a city parks vehicle, he saw his former comrades and told the driver of the truck, “Let me out...I’m going over here with these guys...They’re out there for me now and I would look foolish working and they’re out there [on strike] for me.” So Evans joined the strike.<sup>82</sup>

The workers continued this practice of gathering in Tom Stith Park throughout the strike, arriving each morning at 7:30am, just as they once had before reporting to work. Evans recalled:

“We sat out there in the park. We would talk. We would pray and sing and carry on. So one morning [sanitation superintendent Herman] Drake decided to come out there and he was going to make us go back to work. Come out there demanding. So he came out and as I saw him coming. I said, ‘They’re coming out here now to make us go back to work. Either they’re going to threaten to fire you,’ and I said to the guys, ‘Whatever they say, don’t even comment. Just listen to what they’ve got to say. Don’t say anything. So [sanitation superintendent Herman] Drake said “I’ll give you fifteen minutes to get on that hill and get back to work.” They listened to me. Nobody said a word...Everybody sat there and the fifteen minutes was up and nobody went on the hill. So after a while we saw him coming back. He said, ‘Well, I gave y’all fifteen minutes to get on the hill. Nobody came. So all of you can consider yourself fired!’ ”<sup>83</sup>

While the workers remained united on strike, white city officials scrambled to find alternative ways to collect trash before the summer heat led to bigger problems with smell and pests, including providing large containers at various sites across the city. Not all sanitation workers

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<sup>81</sup> Stan Hollowell, “Sanitation Workers Stand Fast,” *Evening Telegram*, July 28, 1978, 1, Millie Buchanan, “Three Workers Rehired, Others Plan Protest,” *Evening Telegram*, July 28, 1978, 11.

<sup>82</sup> Evans, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 28-29.

<sup>83</sup> Evans, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 38-39.

joined the strike. As Giles recounted, some of the older workers who drove the trucks did not strike out of fear for their jobs, or to support their families. But the all younger workers walked off, following Giles' lead, leaving the older drivers with no trash collectors walking behind their trucks. "The older guys didn't have anybody hardly to walk behind the trucks because all the young guys stayed with us." Only three of the fifteen garbage trucks remained in service after the walkout began. Batchelor sent a letter to all fired workers, informing them that they could appeal for reinstatement if they went on strike due to misinformation, namely, if they thought the city has broken a promise to have the charges against Evans dropped. Batchelor claimed the city had made no such promise and that he would honor any appeals by them on this basis. By Saturday, July 29, nine of the striking workers appealed and were reinstated.<sup>84</sup>

The remaining twenty-seven workers and their supporters staged their first mass march on Sunday, July 30, beginning on Stokes Avenue at the Weeks Armstrong housing project on the east side of town. The marchers wound their way through the streets of the project then out onto Virginia Avenue and, after passing Northeastern cemetery, turned left onto Coleman Avenue and through the streets of the Black neighborhood called "Crosstown" before coming back down East Grand Avenue to Albemarle Avenue and toward Tom Stith Park where they staged a rally across from the sanitation site. There, Leonard Giles told those gathered that though the return to work of nine strikers had "weakened the effect" of the walkout, the workers would continue their protest. Rev. Morris reported over \$1,000 in donations raised for the strikers at the rally. The

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<sup>84</sup> Millie Buchanan, "Plans Made for Picking Up Garbage," "Trash Piles Up," *Evening Telegram*, July 26, 1978, 1; Millie Buchanan, "Sanitation Workers Explain Job Walk Offs," July 27, 1978, 1; Buchanan, "Three Workers Rehired, Others Plan Protest," *Evening Telegram*, July 28, 1978, 11; Buchanan, "Nine Sanitation Workers Return," *Evening Telegram*, July 30, 1978, 1; Giles interview SOHP, 53.

next day, however, all the remaining strikers voted to return to work after meeting with Batchelor. Reinstated, they returned to work on Tuesday, August 1. Batchelor publicly spun this outcome to the city's benefit, stating they did so after "requesting reinstatement on the basis that the walkout was the result of a 'misunderstanding among the parties concerned.'" <sup>85</sup>

Leonard Giles contended that economic pressures forced the strikers back to work, not a 'misunderstanding.' He also affirmed the workers would continue to demand the dismissal of larceny charges against Evans and an apology from city officials, announcing, "the sanitation workers vow to continue the struggle to clear Mr. Evans and call on the community to stand with them and attend a mass meeting on Tuesday, August 1 at 7:30 p.m. at the North End Baptist Church." Giles invited the mayor and city manager to attend the meeting but they did not appear, claiming they had to attend to city council business. At the mass meeting, supporters voted to picket the Rocky Mount Judicial Center on August 3, the day the District Court had scheduled Evans' case. The city manager issued picket permits to Rev. Walker of the CCA and Naomi Green of the SCLC. Workers planned to skip work to attend the trial. However, the district attorney delayed the case another week. Workers waited to see what the judicial process would deliver. <sup>86</sup>

District Court Judge Ben Neville dashed workers' hope on Thursday, August 10, when he found Evans guilty of larceny and sentenced him to 181 days in jail, suspended for two years

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<sup>85</sup> Hollowell, *Evening Telegram*, July 28, 1978, 1; "Rocky Mount Rehires Nine," *News & Observer* [Raleigh, N.C.], July 31, 1978, 16; Buchanan and Hollowell, "Fired City Sanitation Workers Are Reinstated," *Evening Telegram*, July 31, 1978, 1; "Sanitation Employees Return To Their Jobs," *Graphic*, August 1, 1978, 1.

<sup>86</sup> Buchanan and Hollowell, "Fired City Sanitation Workers Are Reinstated," *Evening Telegram*, July 31, 1978, 1; Buchanan, "Trash Collection Back to Normal," *Evening Telegram*, August 1, 1978; "Evans Larceny Trial Is Continued," *Evening Telegram*, August 3, 1978.

upon payment of \$100 fine and two years “good behavior.” Neville lived in Whitakers as did Evans. Evans’ niece, Katie Evans Roberson, later complained that Judge Neville should have recused himself as he knew the defendant from living in the same small farm town, where a white minority ruled a Black majority. Defense attorney Quentin Sumner, the young Black attorney who had previously represented the Seaboard Food strikers, declared to the press that, “the state is trying to punish a man for doing his job.” He elaborated “He [Evans] is on trial here today but in fact every city sanitation worker is on trial.” Meanwhile, Assistant District Attorney David Joyner said a “not guilty” verdict would give a “license to steal” to every city worker. Sumner appealed Evans’ conviction to Superior Court. Meanwhile, most sanitation workers reported to the job the day after the guilty verdict, though twelve workers called in sick to protest. As usual, a group gathered in Tom Stith Park, now considered a “rallying point” for Evans’ supporters.<sup>87</sup> The city manager issued a permit to Rev. Walker and Naomi Green to begin picketing city hall on the following Monday, August 14.<sup>88</sup>

Thirty-eight sanitation workers walked off the job that Monday in protest of the District Court decision, which they called the “fourth walkout.” Leonard Giles told the press, “We talked with our supervisors and told them we would not work under these conditions. We’ll go back when it’s settled.” Giles and about twelve co-workers picketed city hall and passed out flyers protesting the conviction of Alexander Evans. To demonstrate their determination not to back down, local SCLC leader Naomi Green contacted Golden Frinks, state field organizer for the

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<sup>87</sup> Hollowell, “Court Calls Evans Guilty of Larceny,” *Evening Telegram*, August 10, 1978; Buchanan, “Garbage Strike Continues,” *Evening Telegram*, August 16, 1978, 29.

<sup>88</sup> Hollowell, “Evans Backers Obtain Permit for Picketing,” *Evening Telegram*, August 11, 1978.

SCLC, who soon arrived in town and asked for a meeting with City Manager Batchelor. Most likely, she viewed this as a strategy to garner more media attention and support for the sanitation workers' plight.<sup>89</sup>

Frinks, Green and ALSC's Shirley Pinnix met with City Manager Batchelor and Mayor Turnage for more than an hour. Afterward, Frinks said the national SCLC would bring "massive pressure" for a "speedy trial" for Evans. He also vowed to "bring the city to its knees" if Nash County Superior Court did not move the hearing of Evans' appeal from September 25, over a month away, to a date in the next week. Finally, Frinks pledged SCLC support for a massive march and rally called by the CCA for the following Sunday, August 20.<sup>90</sup>

Golden Frinks, nicknamed "The Great Agitator," lived in Edenton, North Carolina. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., had designated Frinks as the state's SCLC field representative in 1963. During the 1960s and 1970s, he traversed the state leading campaigns in Edenton, Williamston, Plymouth, Bertie, and Hyde County and other towns in eastern North Carolina. Though he had earned a reputation for fearlessness, the workers did not trust Frinks like they trusted Green. Giles recounted, "Frinks came down twice, but we didn't want to deal with him...He came basically to get some media attention. I met with him one time and was totally turned off."<sup>91</sup>

Rev. Walker submitted a parade permit for as many as 3,000 people to march on Sunday, August 20, from City Lake on the predominately white Nash County side of town to Tom Stith

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<sup>89</sup> Millie Buchanan, "Sanitation Workers Stage New Walkout," *Evening Telegram*, August 14, 1978, 9.

<sup>90</sup> Millie Buchanan, "Supporters Demand 'Speedy Trial'," *Evening Telegram*, August 15, 1978, 9; "Frinks Ask Speed In Trial of Evans," *Graphic*, August 15, 1978, 1, 8. On Pinnix attending the meeting with city officials, see Lucy Lewis, email to James Wrenn, November 8, 2022, in author's possession.

<sup>91</sup> Golden Frinks (1920-2004), Shirl Spicer "Golden Frinks," 2004, <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/Frinks-Golden>, accessed 1/21/2023; Giles interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 39.

Park on the Edgecombe side. Marching in the white side of town certainly reflected an escalation of the struggle as the previous march occurred on the predominately Black Edgecombe County side. Walker predicted the march and rally would be the largest ever held in Rocky Mount. Meanwhile, the local NAACP president Esmerelda Hawkins announced her organization would “do nothing for now,” and declined to support the march or send a representative to speak at the rally, which exposed a divide in the Black middle class between the CCA and NAACP. This contrasted with the earlier joint action by both groups for voting rights before city council in February. While the NAACP supported Evans in his effort to get charges against him dismissed, Hawkins said they did not feel the organization should intervene in the judicial process “at this point,” while noting that fifty percent of CCA members also belonged to the NAACP.<sup>92</sup>

City Manager Batchelor reported that by Friday, August 18, nine of the fifteen garbage trucks were in service, but mainly staffed with city workers from other departments who volunteered to work on their day off. Trucks covered collection routes only once a week. Meanwhile, the CCA continued to raise funds to help the strikers pay their bills. Supporters sponsored a fundraising fish and chicken dinner plate sale at North End Baptist Church, and Rev. Walker reported that each striking worker received a \$40 check that week.<sup>93</sup>

Giles credited the Black grassroots citizens of Rocky Mount as the real “heroes” of the strike due to both their moral and monetary support. He recalled “people would donate their dollars and quarters.” Willie Moody remembered that in spite of needing to support his wife and two

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<sup>92</sup> “NAACP: ‘We’ll Do Nothing For Now,’” *Graphic*, August 15, 1978, 1.

<sup>93</sup> Millie Buchanan, “Garbage Strike Continues,” *Evening Telegram*, August 16, 1978, 29; Stan Hollowell, “Volunteers Work Today As Trash Strike Continues,” “Fund-Raising For Strikers Is Continuing,” *Evening Telegram*, August 18, 1978, 9.

small children with no paycheck coming in, “somehow the bills got paid. That was a miracle.” The ability of low paid, Black sanitation workers, without a union and clearly under financial stress, to continue the strike over several weeks with almost no attrition speaks volumes on their commitment to justice for Evans and the deep community support from the Black community.<sup>94</sup>

While the NAACP declined to support the march, and the strikers viewed Golden Frinks’ support as “grandstanding,” the sanitation workers received warm solidarity from the African Liberation Support Committee. The ALSC held its annual national conference at the Franklinton Center at Bricks outside of Whitakers on Saturday, August 19, 1978. Shirley Pinnix introduced Leonard Giles to the 350 attendees who gathered under the slogan “Self-Determination for the Black Belt Nation,” linking striking Black workers with the Black radical tradition and African liberation struggles. Giles delivered a “militant statement of solidarity” from the Rocky Mount sanitation workers, called the “highlight” of the day’s proceedings by the communist *Workers Viewpoint* newspaper. Members of the NC TUEL who attended the conference joined the large delegation from the ALSC in participating in the march and rally in Rocky Mount the next day.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Leonard Giles, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 13, 2018, Sanitation Strike Daily for 121318, <https://youtu.be/5TZH8XPmnv4>, accessed October 8, 2022; Willie Moody, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 19, 2018, Sanitation Strike Daily for 121918.

<sup>95</sup> *Workers Viewpoint*, September 1978, 3,12, photo of Giles speaking to ALSC conference; Lucy Lewis, email to James Wrenn, November 8, 2022; Leonard Giles, telephone interview by James Wrenn, January 24, 2023, notes in author’s possession. The Franklinton Center at Bricks (FCAB), on US 301 in between Whitakers and Enfield, was and still is a conference center affiliated with the United Church of Christ. FCAB has long served as a mecca and meeting space for radical civil rights movements. Other worker strikes actively supported by NC TUEL during summer of 1978: state dockworkers in Morehead City; Trader’s Chevrolet mechanics in Greensboro; Seaboard Foods truck drivers in Rocky Mount; Cone Mills textile workers in Haw River; Gold Kist Poultry workers in Durham. So two of these six strikes supported by the NC TUEL were in Rocky Mount. James Wrenn to Elizabeth Wheaton, October 9, 1981, in author’s possession.

Map of 1978 Rocky Mount Sanitation Workers Strike

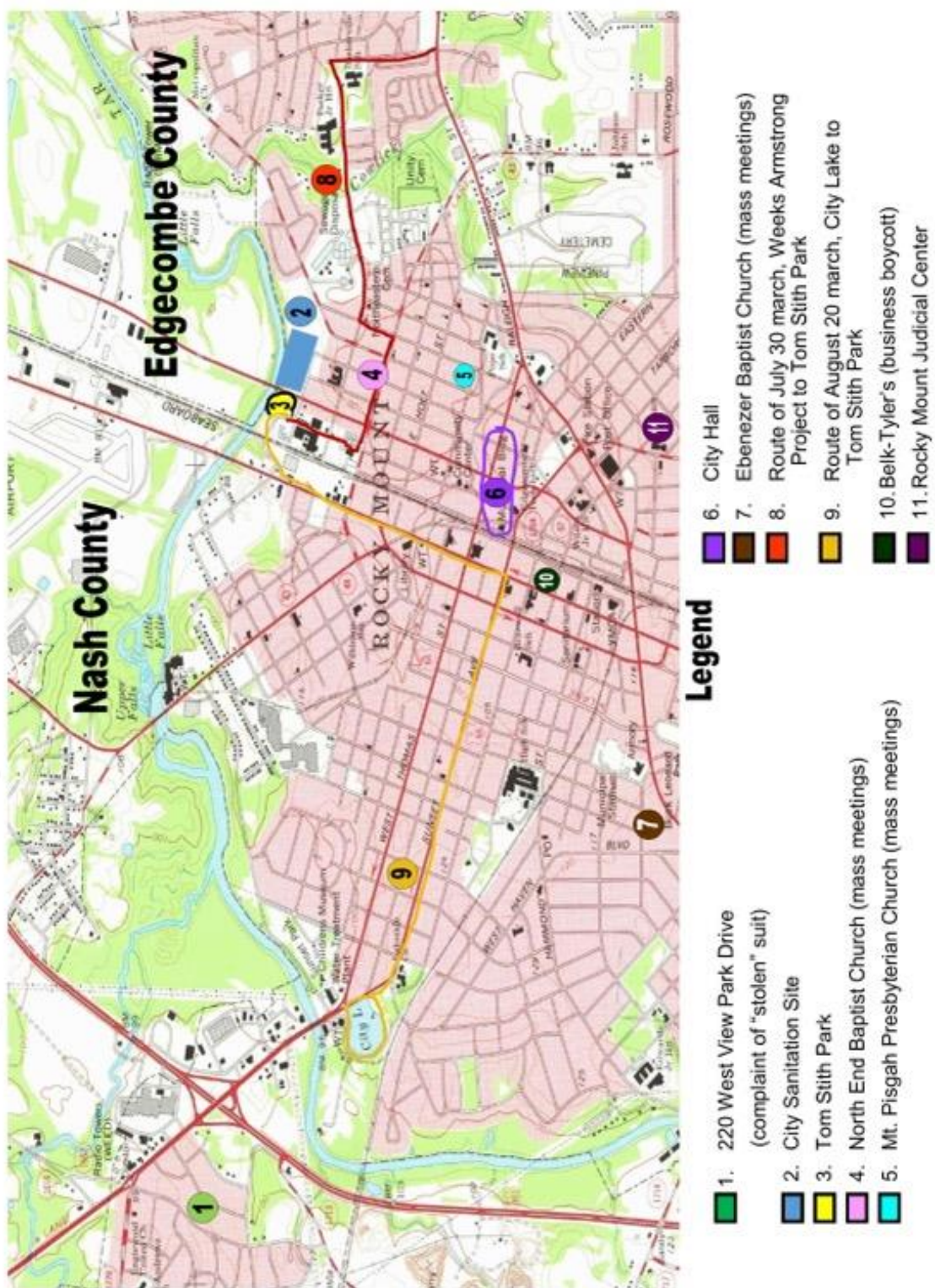


FIGURE 10: Map of 1978 Rocky Mount Sanitation Workers Strike



**FIGURE 11:** Golden Frinks. (*Evening Telegram* [Rocky Mount, N.C.] August 15, 1978, 9)

An estimated 1,000 people marched two and a half miles “in blazing heat” from City Lake, down Sunset Avenue, turning left onto Church Street and continuing until turning right at Riverside Drive, and proceeding under the CSX railroad track into Tom Stith Park. The event attracted a wide range of supporters both locally and statewide. The Seaboard Foods workers, who had gone on strike in May, carried a banner declaring “United Truck Drivers Support Sanitation Workers.” Both Leonard Giles and Alexander Evans spoke at the rally. Rev. Walker announced a boycott of downtown businesses to apply economic pressure in the effort to exonerate Alexander Evans of larceny charges. The economic boycott recalled the three month boycott of white downtown businesses in 1968 organized by the nine community organizations of the Consolidated Council (CCI). Rev. Walker described white Rocky Mount businessmen as “Pharaohs of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.” The time had come to let the people go.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> “Black Group To Step Up Boycott of Merchants in Downtown RM,” *Graphic*, August 22, 1978; Stan Hollowell, “Downtown Stores are Boycott Target,” *Evening Telegram*, August 21, 1978, 1; Millie Buchanan, “CCA Continues Strike, Boycott,” *Evening Telegram*, August 22, 1978, 9.

Walker also called for every working person in the city to donate \$1 per week to support striking workers while they went without paychecks. Finally, Walker told rally attendees the protest would continue and the city would never be a “peaceful place” if it did not rehire the strikers after the strike concluded. WVO activist Jim Waller, leader of the Cone Mills strike in Haw River, North Carolina, the previous month, delivered rousing remarks at the rally on behalf of the NC TUEL, pledging TUEL support for the sanitation workers, and linking the Rocky Mount strike to other strikes across the state that summer. SCLC’s Golden Frinks, described as using the “strongest rhetoric” at the rally, vowed to “raise hell in Rocky Mount” if city did not drop charges against Evans.<sup>97</sup>



**FIGURE 12:** Alexander Evans speaks at August 20, 1978 rally at Tom Stith Park. (photo from “Homegoing Celebration for Rev. Alexander Evans,” August 21, 2007)

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<sup>97</sup> Stan Hollowell, “Downtown Stores Are Boycott Target,” *Evening Telegram*, August 21, 1978, 1; Millie Buchanan, “CCA Continues Strike Support, Boycott,” *Evening Telegram*, August 22, 1978, 9. Walker estimated 1,000 in the march and 2,000 at the park rally. The police estimated 250 in the march and 600 at the park rally. Jim Waller was elected president of ACTWU Local 1113-T at Cone’s Granite plant at Haw River in Alamance County. The Cone workers’ strike lasted from June 29 to July 10, 1978.

As of Monday morning, August 21, thirty-four workers continued on strike and supporters began a boycott picket of downtown Rocky Mount businesses plus pickets on both sides on Main Street in the block in front of city hall. At a press conference two days later, Leonard Giles announced the workers would return to work if City Manager Batchelor agreed to five demands the workers had submitted to him. Giles said,

“The accumulated garbage is beginning to be a health hazard to the community and we don’t want anyone to be hurt or get sick. This morning we presented a list of demands to City Manager Bill Batchelor stating that we, the sanitation workers of Rocky Mount, acknowledge having participated in a work stoppage from August 14 through August 23. This work stoppage was a result of our own free will. We were not influenced by any outside group or individuals.”<sup>98</sup>

The demands workers presented first called for Batchelor to issue a public apology to Evans and the workers; the city of Rocky Mount must make a public announcement in support of Evans; such charges not be brought in the future without a ‘through investigation by immediate supervisors and the city manager;’ specific instructions be provided in writing as to the procedure for picking up garbage; and the men’s return to work be ‘unconditional.’ Giles added that Batchelor had to meet all five demands before workers return to the job. The city manager told the press that he would examine the demands before replying, but he said two demands had already been met two—a promise for further investigation in the future before filing charges and clarification of policy. Interestingly however, two major demands that workers had advocated did not appear on the list: dismissing larceny charges against Evans, and giving Evans a ‘speedy

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<sup>98</sup> Stan Hollowell and Millie Buchanan, “Batchelor Given Strikers’ Demands,” *Evening Telegram*, August 23, 1978, 17. Giles’ last sentence suggests that city management or other right-wing groups such as the John Birch Society or Ku Klux Klan blamed the strike on the communist WVO/ALSC or SCLC influence. Evans and Giles did recall an anti-communist poster tacked to a pole along the August 20 parade route and also a pickup truck with unfriendly whites shadowing the march. Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 53.

trial.’ This suggests that striking workers had resolved to return to work prior to the Superior Court appeal if the city acquiesced to the other five demands. Asked years later if Rev. Walker’s “power brokerage” with city officials influenced the decision, Giles said the workers would have not agreed to return to work if not advised so by Naomi Green, Shirley Pinnix, and Lucy Lewis.<sup>99</sup>

Pinnix and Lewis, in turn, received guidance from the WVO, ALSC, and TUEL leadership in Durham. Lewis recalled going back and forth to Durham to consult with Sally Bermanzohn. At that time, Bermanzohn served on the WVO’s southern regional leadership committee as well as a statewide leader of the NC TUEL. Former Duke Hospital worker Bermanzohn recalled, “We didn’t tell the workers what to do. We advised them and offered support. We counseled them that unity is precious. We learned that from the Duke Hospital campaign.” So while they advised Giles and the workers stay focused on their demands for Evans and not allow Rev. Walker and others to divert their energies behind the scenes, Green, Pinnix and Lewis advocated a public united front.<sup>100</sup>

On Wednesday evening, the CCA convened another mass meeting at Rev. Morris’s Mt. Pisgah United Presbyterian Church, where attendees voted to continue the boycott of downtown merchants. The next day, Rev. Walker announced the supporters at the mass meeting had also agreed to “get the churches involved and came up with the idea of an act of prayer and

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<sup>99</sup> Savarette Trotter, “Strikers Submit 5 Demands,” *The Graphic*, August 24, 1978, 1. Leonard Giles, telephone interview with James Wrenn, February 2, 2023, notes in possession of author.

<sup>100</sup> Sally Bermanzohn, telephone interview with James Wrenn, February 22, 2023, notes in author’s possession; Lucy Lewis, email to James Wrenn, November 8, 2022; Waller, *Love and Revolution*, 156; Sally Bermanzohn, *Through Survivor’s Eyes: From the Sixties to the Greensboro Massacre*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), 166. In the interview, Bermanzohn referred to the political infighting among the organizing committee members during the first Duke Hospital campaign that may have contributed to the union losing the close vote.

supplication in front of each church in the city” starting Sunday, August 27. Raising the ante himself, Rev. Walker declared, “The people have decided to escalate the boycott this weekend...More people are getting out on the streets and passing out leaflets... asking shoppers not go downtown.”<sup>101</sup>

Sanitation workers and the CCA asked the North Carolina Attorney General Rufus Edmisten to intervene. Deputy Attorney General Howard Cramer reported that the office had received the request and informed Evans and Rev. Walker that the attorney general had no statutory authority to intervene in the case, unless the defendant’s lawyers appealed a Superior Court conviction to the State Court of Appeals. Rev. Walker and Rev. Morris also met with the executive committee of the Rocky Mount Chamber of Commerce in an effort to get its members to take a stand in the matter, but the Chamber declined, alleging its duties did not extend to “ the judicial process.”<sup>102</sup>

Soon, Rev. Walker announced the CCA had applied for a new permit beginning Monday, August 28, to picket both sides of Main Street between Nash and Western Avenue to support the boycott of downtown merchants, including the Belk-Tyler department, a major retailer previously targeted in the 1968 boycott. This picket would be in addition to the picket of city hall. CCA scheduled another mass meeting for Sunday, August 27, at Rev. Walker’s Ebenezer Baptist Church.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> “Churches Asked to Support Evans,” *Evening Telegram*, August 24, 1978, 13.

<sup>102</sup> “Attorney General Will Not Act on Case,” *Evening Telegram*, August 24, 1978, 13; Saravette Trotter, “Strikers Submit 5 Demands,” *Graphic*, August 24, 1978, 1. Rufus L. Edmisten (b. 1941- ) served as North Carolina Attorney General 1974 to 1984. He gained national attention in 1973 as deputy chief counsel to the U.S. Senate Watergate Committee, chaired by his mentor Senator Sam Ervin.

<sup>103</sup> “City Succeeds With Once-A-Week Pickup,” *Evening Telegram*, August 25, 1978, 1.



**FIGURE 13:** City Manager Bill Batchelor talks with reporters.  
(*Graphic* [Nashville, N.C.], August 24, 1978)

As the strike entered its twelfth day on August 25, the city manager reported that eleven of the city's fifteen sanitation trucks ran their routes. According to Batchelor, thirty-nine employees were working while thirty-nine workers, with a couple on sick leave, remained absent. However, this report of an increased number of employees on trash collection obscured the fact that the city borrowed them from other departments and that after two weeks on strike the original core of thirty-six strikers stood fast. In an effort to ease residents' minds, Batchelor told the press that the city would complete its once-a-week trash pickup by Saturday. He also stated that he had made neither a decision on the demands presented by the workers nor plans to replace the workers,

adding he might have to “take steps to relieve the situation, if piled up garbage became a health hazard.”<sup>104</sup>

The summer heat and humidity worsened the smell and insect infestation of mounting trash, which gave the workers leverage in their ongoing struggle with the city. As Rev. Walker remarked, “When the city manager doesn’t come to work, nobody notices. But when sanitation workers don’t work, everyone gets concerned. The city plunges into chaos.” On Monday, August 28, the sanitation workers began their third consecutive week on strike and the CCA escalated the boycott by picketing city hall and both sides of Main Street near the Belk-Tyler’s department store.<sup>105</sup>

On that same day, Batchelor responded to the workers’ demands in a memorandum. The CCA met with the workers later that day to review the city manager’s four “clarification proposals.” These “proposals” included a stipulation that any future walkouts by any employee will result in immediate termination; any work slowdown will result in dismissal or disciplinary action; any further violation of City Personnel Ordinance will also result in dismissal or disciplinary action; and all the above conditions to apply to all employees who have been on unexcused absence from August 14 through August 25, 1978. None of Batchelor’s “proposals” addressed the demands of the workers for an apology to Evans and a statement of support for Evans or workers’ demand for unconditional return to work.

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<sup>104</sup> “City Succeeds With Once-A-Week Pickup,” *Evening Telegram*, August 25, 1978, 1; “12 Trash Trucks On Streets Today,” *Evening Telegram*, August 26, 1978, 1; “Forty-five to fifty” employees in sanitation, Evans interview SOHP, 25.

<sup>105</sup> Rev. Thomas L. Walker, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 13, 2018, Sanitation Strike Daily for 121318, <https://youtu.be/5TZH8XPmnv4>, accessed October 9, 2022.

In the meantime, the workers made revisions to the city manager's proposals and sent these back to Batchelor for his acceptance. Their amendments clarified that any future walkouts not related to the Evans case would not result in immediate dismissal. Workers also demanded that what constitutes a "work slowdown" be specified in accord with the City Personnel Ordinance and that the city enumerate what specific violations of the City Personnel Ordinance could result in dismissal. The workers made clear that Batchelor's proposals constitute a failure on the part of the city manager to accept the terms of unconditional reinstatement presented on August 23, 1978 by the workers.

The city agreed to the workers' revision that limited "immediate termination" to only future walkouts related to the Alexander Evans case, not any future walkout, almost protecting a de-facto "right to strike" from automatic termination. When Batchelor suggested that the city consider reinstatement of workers on an individual basis, workers stayed unified and refused. They demanded and secured collective reinstatement of all strikers. This represented collective bargaining without a union or a contract. In defiance of North Carolina's "right-to-work" state status and the state's GS 95-98 ban on collective bargaining for public employees, the workers' series of proposals and counter-proposals reflected a sophisticated bargaining strategy on the part of the workers led by Giles, guided by Green, Pinnix and Lewis, but in collaboration with Revs. Walker, Morris and the CCA.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> "City Gives Terms For Rehiring Striking Workers," *Graphic*, August 29, 1978, 1; Stan Hollowell, "Sanitation Workers To Return," *Evening Telegram*, August 30, 1978, 1; "Sanitation Strike in RM Is Ended," *Graphic*, August 31, 1978, 1; Concerned Citizens Association, "A News Conference, 8/28/78," in author's possession. See Appendix H for complete text. Original copy given to author by Alexander Evans. Brandie Ragghianti, "The 1978 Rocky Mount Sanitation Workers Strike: An Argument for Statewide Significance" (2018), unpublished paper, in author's possession; Chapman, *Jim Crow 95-98*.

On the morning of August 30, Rev. Thomas Walker, the CCA, and the sanitation workers convened a press conference to announce the workers had met with the city manager as a group that morning and negotiated a return to work on the next day. The CCA also had agreed to end the boycott of downtown merchants. The CCA released a four page document, read at the press conference by Rev. Walker, entitled “A News Conference, 8/30/78.” The CCA pledged that day to continue support for the workers’ efforts to exonerate Alexander Evans and fund-raise for his legal fees. The fact that the date of his appeal hearing by the Nash County Superior Court had not changed gave them almost a month to do so.<sup>107</sup>

Rev. Walker claimed victory at the press conference. “The point has been made as far as the walkout is concerned,” he stated, “We feel we can better handle the problem [Evans’ case] with the men on the job.” Of note, the CCA press statement credited a select group for the fortunate turn of events. “We are especially grateful for the role played by the Rocky Mount Ministerial Conference and our [Black] Councilman Rev. George Dudley,” it acknowledged, “for their role played in encouraging the men to return to work and negotiating to that end.” This reflected the dynamics between the middle class male ministers desiring to take credit versus the worker strike leaders, advised by a coterie of working class women activists. Giles said they would not have returned to work without agreement from Green, Pinnix, and Lewis.<sup>108</sup>

The CCA statement also addressed larger political issues, such as the racially biased at-large voting for city council that had served as the subject of mass protests for over a decade. The city

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<sup>107</sup> Hollowell, “Sanitation Workers To Return;” CCA, “A News Conference.” Joyce M. Dickens told me (n.d.) she likely authored this CCA press statement as public relations representative for Rev. Walker’s Ebenezer Baptist Church.

<sup>108</sup> CCA, “A News Conference;” Leonard Giles, telephone interview with James Wrenn, February 2, 2023.

council had created only one Black majority ward for a city with a Black population of over forty percent, and the candidates for that ward were subject to votes at that time from its majority white citizens. With seven seats total, a racially proportionate ward system in Rocky Mount then would create at least three Black majority wards and ensure that Black citizens had a voice in who represented them. Nor was this arrangement limited to Rocky Mount in 1978; at least nine North Carolina cities maintained this form of discriminatory at-large voting to dilute or suppress the Black vote.<sup>109</sup>

Rev. Walker seized upon the resolution of the strike to address ongoing political inequities. “We must, however, recognize the fact that the city of Rocky Mount has a system of election of city officials that deem it necessary for its minority citizens to resort to the streets and news media to have their opinions heard,” he averred. The CCA called for a true ward system to ensure racially proportional representation; with this, the possibility of future incidents like the one endured by Evans would also presumably abate. To demonstrate the community’s solidarity and commitment, the CCA announced plans for a “Unification Rally” on Sunday, September 3, in Tom Stith Park. Beyond showing unity and clarifying the issues in the Evans case, leaders announced the rally would “point out that the conditions are merely symptoms of what ‘ails’ Rocky Mount.”

Rev. Walker then described the gains of the campaign, noting that the “men have continued to affirm that an injustice has been done to Mr. Evans and all Sanitation [*sic*] workers.” Those workers in turn “have demanded respect for their dignity and pride. The amplification of this

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<sup>109</sup> Vickie Wiggins, “Electing City Council,” *Evening Telegram*, October 13, 1983.

problem,” he continued, “has pointed out the presence of many problems in the City’s [sic] employment and promotion practices.” Among these were a poor affirmative action program that left African Americans relegated in blue collar jobs and whites in management and supervisory roles. Rev. Walker expressed hope that this “long confrontation has allowed Rocky Mount and its citizens to take another look at itself.” He concluded by linking the economic injustice to inequities in “schools, housing, hiring practices, etc.”<sup>110</sup>

Rev. Walker reminded all involved that: “This matter is not over, it has just begun... We’ve cursed the dark but now we are going to light some candles. ... You don’t carry Rocky Mount through the greatest drama in its history and then walk away from it.” He laid out the attempt “...to come up with a system that will allow greater participation by all citizens” in the political process. He noted that the “sanitation workers resorted to walkouts and picketing due to the failure of the city manager to handle Evans’ matter administratively.” Rev. Walker ended with these prophetic words: “The suffering of the sanitation workers and of the Rocky Mount community is a price that must be paid for democratic government and freedom.”<sup>111</sup>

Following the strikers return to work on August 31, everyone’s attention turned to the campaign to exonerate Alexander Evans at the upcoming Superior Court jury trial. Young Black attorneys Quentin Sumner and Antonia Lawrence had agreed to represent Evans. Sumner remembered, “I vividly recall the day that Alexander Evans, Leonard Giles and two or three

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<sup>110</sup> CCA, “A News Conference, 8/30/78.” p. 3.

<sup>111</sup> Hollowell, “Sanitation Workers To Return,” 8; CCA, “A News Conference, 8/30/78.” Presumed author of these words, Joyce M. Dickens, later founded and directed the Rocky Mount/Edgecombe Community Development Corporation (1988 to present), initiating many projects for affordable housing and Black economic development on the city’s Edgecombe side, realizing a tangible form of Black political power. Dickens along with other women Green, Pinnix, and Lewis played key roles in this strike of Black men.

other men [the Edmondson brothers and Roosevelt Pittman] walked into my office and told me they had a problem they needed to discuss with me.” After Evans and Giles explained the situation, Sumner said he “felt quite comfortable that I could get the matter resolved” outside the courtroom. “Little did I know that at that time a number of outside factors were in play” which neither he nor Evans could control. “They would prevent a reasonable resolution to this case,” Sumner realized. “After discussions with the district attorney and the city manager, I was informed that they intended to try Alexander Evans for felonious larceny” due to the strike and the boycott. “They would make an example of him to be used as a message to the others.”<sup>112</sup>

Indeed, when Sumner spoke with city manager Batchelor, district attorney Boney, and police officer Draughan, all remained adamant that they would not dismiss the case. So Sumner determined to “take them to court and beat their butt.” After Sumner could not convince Judge Neville to find “no probable cause” in the District Court hearing on August 10, he appealed Neville’s “guilty” verdict to Superior Court. Finally on September 25, 1978, the Nash County Superior Court convened to hear Evans’ case at the county courthouse in Nashville, before Judge George Fountain of Tarboro. Years later, as a retired Superior Court judge himself, Sumner confirmed: “I knew that if Evans was found guilty by the jury, Judge Fountain was going to send him to prison. Such was his reputation: hard on Blacks, with no sympathy or mercy toward them.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Quentin Sumner, “Comments of Alexander Evans,” October 12, 2018, in author’s possession. Quentin Sumner, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 19, 2018, Sanitation Strike Daily for 121818, <https://youtu.be/xrcl4p99hOk>, accessed October 9, 2022.

<sup>113</sup> Quentin Sumner, email to James Wrenn, February 22, 2023; Quentin Sumner, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 19, 2018.

Most of the sanitation workers skipped work to fill the courtroom in support of Evans. Management had told workers they could take a day of paid vacation to attend the trial. Sumner's defense relied on Evans' testimony that he was a lay preacher who truly thought the suit had been left for the trash and he took it to give to someone who needed a suit. The district attorney countered that the Pinnell family had left the suit out for the dry cleaners to pick up. But when the dry cleaners' driver, Fred Scott of Quality Cleaners, took the stand as a key prosecution witness, he actually aided the defense. Scott testified that he didn't know the last time he had picked up clothes from that address. "When I picked it up, it wasn't on that day."<sup>114</sup>

According to Sumner, the testimony of Evans' co-workers really "turned the tide." The lawyer called several sanitation workers to take the stand and asked them "what were some of the things people threw away as trash that you have picked up and taken home?" Rudolph Edmondson mentioned a floor model color television set that still worked, adding "It took at least two men to pick it up." At that point, Sumner motioned for four workers to bring the television into the courtroom as evidence. "The judge went crazy," he recalled, banging his gavel and demanding that the workers take the television out of the court room. Yet, as Sumner said, "the damage had been done. The jury had seen the television set."<sup>115</sup>

The Nash County Superior Court jury of seven white women, three Black women, and two white men deliberated just thirteen minutes before jury foreman Hillman Bass delivered a verdict

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<sup>114</sup> "Evans Appeal Set Today," *Evening Telegram*, September 25, 1979, p. 9; Evans interview SOHP, p. 32; Sumner, "Comments on Alexander Evans;" *State v Alexander Evans*, File #78-CRS-7143, Nash County Superior Court, subpoena for Fred Scott.

<sup>115</sup> Sumner, "Comments on Alexander Evans;" Rudolph Edmondson, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 13, 2018, Sanitation Strike Daily for 121318, <https://youtu.be/5TZH8XPmrv4>, accessed October 9, 2022; Quentin Sumner, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 19, 2018.

of not guilty. Workers who packed the courtroom cheered. Sumner called the move to bring the television set into court a “brilliant strategy” and credited his now deceased law partner Antonia Lawrence. Even though the final victory for Evans occurred in the court room and not on the picket line, the workers’ actions more than the lawyers made the difference. Attorney Sumner later reflected, “Mr. Evans and the workers deserve all the credit. Those men did something heroic. They made sacrifices that impacted themselves, their families and the community. But it was worth it.”<sup>116</sup>

Alexander Evans returned to work in the sanitation department and worked there until his retirement in September 1996. Though he claimed he had a good job waiting for him at the Atlantic Coastline railroad, Rev. Walker asked him not to leave. “If you leave the city, it’s going to defeat the whole purpose.” So, Evans said, “I stuck with them until I retired.” In fact, after the strike, Evans received a promotion from working on the ground behind the trash truck to driving the front-end lift truck, which he described as “going to jump from being a thief to being self-supervisor.” But Evans also saw the city’s hidden agenda in his promotion to a driver who

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<sup>116</sup> Millie Buchanan, “Evans Is Innocent, Jury Quickly Decides,” *Evening Telegram*, September 25, 1978, 9, on the same page, leading article headline read “Rocky Mount Workers Join National Railway Strike;” *State v Alexander Evans*, File #78-CRS-7143, Nash County Superior Court. Jury of ten women and two men : 1. Sallie Vick (white female); 2. Janice E. Brown (white female); 3. Sevada Cooper (white female); 4. Erma Marshburn (Black female); 5. Barbara Langley (white female); 6. Guida Lewis (white female); 7. Zelma Grimes (Black female); 8. Rebecca Broadie (Black female); 9. Larry Arnold Moore (white male); 10. Emmabelle Foster (white female); 11. Hillman Bass, foreman (white male); 12. Martha Hux (white female); Quentin Sumner, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 19, 2018. Attorney Rev. Antonia Lawrence passed in December 2016. NC Governor Jim Hunt appointed Quentin Sumner to District Court judgeship of Nash, Edgecombe and Wilson in 1983. In 1990, voters elected Sumner to Superior Court judgeship in Nash County. He served until retirement in 2022. Quentin Sumner, email to James Wrenn, March 7, 2023.

worked alone, “they wanted me separated from the group.” Nevertheless, Evans later played a role in organizing the Rocky Mount City Workers Association in the next decade.<sup>117</sup>

Meanwhile, the city terminated Leonard Giles five months later after he and nine other workers refused to work in the snow and on icy roads on February 8, 1979. Public Works Director Earl Beaudry suspended Giles without pay six days later, and Giles appealed his suspension to City Manager Batchelor. Shirley Pinnix of the ALSC jumped into action once again, calling a press conference on February 15 at the Greater Mount Hermon Baptist Church to protest the action against Giles. Giles claimed the city fired him in retaliation for leading the strike in the previous year. In addition, Giles said he had delivered to the city manager a petition signed by forty-three workers to the city manager, requesting a 69 cents across the board raise and minimum pay of \$4 per hour, just two days before his suspension. This was a bold move for sanitation workers, and proof that their militant spirit continued.<sup>118</sup>

Batchelor convened an appeal hearing for Giles that began on February 22 , then recessed and reconvened on February 27. Shirley Pinnix along with eight to ten supporters picketed city hall daily on behalf of Giles and attended a city council meeting on February 26. Giles and co-worker Willie Moody spoke to the council. Giles told the council he had been “singled out” and “personally attacked” because of his role in the Alexander Evans case. Giles said that regardless

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<sup>117</sup> Evans, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 45; Lucinda Trew, “Rocky Mount Rallies in DC,” *Evening Telegram*, September 4, 1983, 13.

<sup>118</sup> Mark Andrews, “Worker Faces Dismissal,” *Evening Telegram*, February 15, 1979, 9; “RM Sanitation Workers Plan Protest Meeting,” *Graphic*, February 15, 1979, 8; “Sanitation Crew Plans Press Meet,” *Evening Telegram*, February 15, 1979, 23.

of the outcome of his appeal, he would fight for his job. In spite of continued protests, City Manager Batchelor upheld Giles' dismissal on March 5, 1979.<sup>119</sup>

Leonard Giles recognized that he became the sacrificial lamb for the strike. "I knew that once I took a stand, I knew I was history. It was just a matter of time. I told those guys...they're going to try to turn y'all against me...Mr. Drake and Mr. Johnson told them they shouldn't follow me and said all kinds of things about me...It didn't bother me because I knew they would eventually get rid of me." After termination from the city, Giles found himself blacklisted from getting any new job in the Rocky Mount/Tarboro area. Green, Pinnix and Lewis urged him to fight for his job and file Labor Board charges, but he preferred to go to his mother's home in New Jersey. Giles was living in Washington, D.C. on November 3, 1979, however, when he heard the news of the Klan murder of five CWP activists in Greensboro, including Jim Waller who had spoken at one of the strike rallies in Rocky Mount. He immediately quit his new job in D.C. and returned to North Carolina, attended the funeral march for the "CWP Five" and then spent the next year working by the side of CWP leader Nelson Johnson in Greensboro.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> "Giles Supporters Granted Permit," *Evening Telegram*, February 23, 1979, 9; Andrews, "Batchelor Upholds Giles Dismissal," *Evening Telegram*, March 5, 1979, 9; Rocky Mount City Council Minutes, February 26, 1979. Giles and Moody recalled there was no discussion among the workers about striking in protest of his firing: not because the workers did not support Giles, but the strike campaign for Evans had taken too much a toll on them to repeat. Also, management tried to intimidate the workers from supporting him. Giles, telephone interview by James Wrenn, April 10, 2023; Willie Moody, telephone interview by James Wrenn, April 10, 2023, notes in author's possession. Moody remembered, "Leonard was our voice," speaking on the impact of Giles' termination.

<sup>120</sup> Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 41-42; Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 61. After working with Johnson and the CWP in Greensboro through 1980, Giles returned to Washington, D.C. and worked at Walter Reed Army Hospital until retirement. In 2003, he returned to his home town of Tarboro and married Gwendolyn Robinson. Leonard and Gwen still live in Tarboro. In July 2003, I facilitated the interviews of Giles and Evans by Kerry Taylor, then a UNC scholar and now professor at The Citadel, for the Southern Oral History Program.

Meanwhile, Evans felt the city was afraid to fire him: “They fired Giles...but they didn’t fire me...it seemed like there was a fear of firing me... they had seen the rally behind the movement” when the community “felt like they had mistreated me.” Evans also reflected on the support he had received. “You do a march and you’ve got three or four thousand people in the street behind you. People wonder about things like that.” Rocky Mount had truly never seen anything comparable, led by African Americans, before 1978. “Preacher” Evans’s quiet humor emerged when he revealed that after he was exonerated and returned to work, the city manager of Rocky Mount asked him “did I know I had a lot of friends?” Evans replied, ‘I reckon I’ve got a few.’”<sup>121</sup>

On the other hand, Giles never regretted his leadership of the strike. “When you see a good man and you know he’s a good man, I got no problems going down with him, none what so ever,” he testified. “That was my thing. If they would have killed me, so it would’ve been. It didn’t matter. I knew Mr. Evans wasn’t a thief. I was willing to do whatever was necessary for him to be innocent.” Giles understood personal sacrifice as part of the price of greater freedom for all. “Yeah, they took me,” he reflected, “but being a Black man anywhere when you stand up for what’s right, you’re going to lose. It’s just that simple.” Giles continued, “The question becomes... is it worth the sacrifice? The answer to me is overwhelming always yes, it’s worth the sacrifice because somebody has to stand up and speak.” But for Giles his sacrifice would be forever linked to his collective Black working class consciousness and solidarity, to his connection to the Black radical tradition: “I tell these guys and I’ll tell anybody, I am now and I was and I will always be a sanitation worker at the City of Rocky Mount.”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 60-61; Evans, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 10.

<sup>122</sup> Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 55-56.

### Chapter Three: Black Workers Take The Lead

Of all the worker strikes that erupted in North Carolina in the summer of 1978, the Rocky Mount sanitation workers strike achieved the clearest victory. Alexander Evans was exonerated of larceny charges and restored to his job in sanitation, even with a promotion to driver. Other city jobs and promotions opened up for Black workers, and the city addressed some of the workers' safety concerns. It also began providing gloves to the sanitation workers.<sup>123</sup>

The workers' walkout on July 25 and the first mass meeting at North End Church on July 26 transformed the effort to exonerate Evans into a community movement. Why did the sanitation workers' strike elicit such mass support? A decade earlier, strikes by sanitation workers in both the Memphis, Tennessee, and St. Petersburg, Florida, as described by Joseph McCartin, members of the Black community rallied following the city government's firing of sanitation strikers, transforming these strikes from workers versus management to the Black community versus the white power structure. McCartin observed in the St. Petersburg strike:

“the strikers' organization was strongly connected to local black churches...In Memphis and St. Petersburg, racial politics ...continued to strengthen the hand of the sanitation workers when they struck...In a political atmosphere charged with fears of racial conflict, politicians were increasingly reluctant to deny a right that sanitation workers claimed as central to their manhood: their right to strike. ”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Samuel Gray, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 13, 2018; Willie Moody, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 19, 2018. Other strikes included: NC Port dockworkers, Morehead City and Wilmington, April 29 to June 4, 1978; Seaboard Foods workers, Rocky Mount, May 24 to June 9, 1978; Trader's Chevrolet mechanics, Greensboro, June to September, 1978; Cone Mills, Haw River, June 29 to July 10, 1978; Gold Kist Poultry, Durham, July 25 to August 24, 1978.

<sup>124</sup> Joseph McCartin, “ ‘ Fire the Hell Out of Them:’ Sanitation Workers' Struggles and the Normalization of the Strike Replacement Strategy in the 1970s,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, Vol. 2, Issue 3 (2005), 74-75.

Joseph Hower also pointed out that after Rev. James Lawson's description of the 1968 Memphis strike as a "threshold moment" or a converging labor and civil rights, sanitation workers in the South became the "militant vanguard" of Black workers and the freedom struggle. Over the next decade, Black sanitation workers staged strikes across the South in St. Petersburg, Florida (1968), Charlotte (1969) and Wilson, NC (1969), Charleston, South Carolina (1969), Atlanta, Georgia (1970), Raleigh, North Carolina (1976), and again in Atlanta (1977) and other cities. These walkouts exhibited a character of mass community struggles allied with Black churches and civil rights or Black Power organizations, not simply trade union strikes.<sup>125</sup>

Michael Honey has noted that "sanitation workers existed in a netherworld between the plantation and the modern economy. Their desperate plight exemplified the larger crisis of the Black working class." The sanitation workers' struggle thus resonated with politically engaged African Americans who shared the legacy of enslavement and the strikers' demand for respect as human beings. Their performance of a nasty, menial job, yet one necessary for the community's welfare, translated into political leverage. Dr. King observed, "the invisible sanitation worker was just as important as the doctor in preventing disease." Moreover, when uncollected garbage

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<sup>125</sup> Joseph Hower, "'A Threshold Moment:' Public Sector Organizing and Civil Rights Unionism in the Postwar South," in Matthew Hild and Keri Leigh Merritt (eds.), *Reconsidering Southern Labor History* (University Press of Florida, 2018), 213. The local Junta of Militant Organizations, which later became the African Peoples Socialist Party, supported the 1968 St. Petersburg sanitation strike. The SCLC supported the 1969 Charleston sanitation strike. The 1976 ten-day strike of 157 Raleigh sanitation workers for a retroactive pay increase was the nearest in time and distance to the Rocky Mount strike. While the workers belonged to an AFSCME local and received picket line support from unionized city fire fighters, strikers relied on Black community organizations and churches similar to the Rocky Mount sanitation strikers in 1978. Rob Christensen, "Strikers Get Blacks' Support," *News and Observer*, July 14, 1976, 14; Christensen, "Strikers End Walkout, Fail to Get Demands," *News and Observer*, July 17, 1976, 1.

accumulates in the street, especially in the summer, everyone feels and smells the results of the workers' strike.<sup>126</sup>

The Rocky Mount sanitation strike stood out as a strike of Black workers relying on Black community support, not traditional AFL-CIO union support. Yet the NC TUEL, which included rank and file members of several AFL-CIO unions and organizing committees, also rallied support for the Rocky Mount strike and connected worker activists to a statewide network. At the national TUEL conference in Pittsburgh in October 1978, Sally Bermanzohn, leading the North Carolina delegation, reported on lessons learned from the Rocky Mount strike for organizing workers in the Black Belt South. She pointed to the power of linking Black worker struggles to the Black community: "trade unions are not a reality down there. But by taking up this bigger struggle against national oppression [of African Americans as an oppressed nation in the Black Belt], the Rocky Mount city workers are going to get unionized."<sup>127</sup>

Along those lines, the Seaboard Foods truck drivers in Rocky Mount, who went on strike with Black community support in May prior to the sanitation workers, voted to join Teamsters Local 391 through a Labor Board election in November 1978. After contract negotiations with Seaboard Foods president William Holmes proved fruitless, thirty-six workers went on strike again on April 3, 1979. City police arrested fifteen picketing strikers for violating Rocky Mount's parade permit ordinance, which required three days' notice, apparently designed to curb civil rights marches. The Teamsters Union challenged this law and the U.S. Fourth Circuit Court

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<sup>126</sup> Michael Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 53.

<sup>127</sup> Waller, *Love and Revolution*, 169.

ruled it unconstitutional. However, after three months on strike with no progress in negotiations with Holmes, the Teamsters concluded the union could not secure a contract with anticipated union dues to offset expenses for organizing and weekly payments to strikers. Local 391 organizer Russ Hogan abruptly informed the Seaboard workers on July 17 that the Teamsters were ending the strike and abandoning the campaign, reflecting their traditional “business union” perspective. The workers felt betrayed and even filed Labor Board charges against the Teamsters for failure to represent. The community-based groups that supported the sanitation workers-- NC TUEL, ALSC, SCLC, CCA -- stepped in to support the Seaboard workers. Yet, in the end, the strikers did not win and lost their jobs, and their movement dissipated by end of 1979. However, the community-based movement supporting the Seaboard Foods workers represented the difference between traditional unions and the Left-led workers movement, and the role these Black workers played in the struggles in Rocky Mount.<sup>128</sup>

Indeed, the Rocky Mount city sanitation workers continued to organize in the wake of the strike and sent representatives to the monthly statewide meetings of the NC TUEL. In October 1981, again linking economics and politics, they provided a base of support for Naomi Green’s historic but unsuccessful campaign for city council. Two months later, along with Green and Rev. Walker’s CCA, the sanitation workers supported Black women workers at the Rocky

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<sup>128</sup> Jim Wrenn to Liz Wheaton, 4; Mark Andrews, “Former Strikers Set Protest March, Rally,” *Evening Telegram*, August 16, 1979; Mark Andrews, “Dubose Blasts Teamsters Union,” *Evening Telegram*, August 21, 1979; “United Truckers To March Today,” *Evening Telegram*, August 26, 1979; “Ex-Striker Files Complaint,” *Evening Telegram*, November 9, 1979; Miki Garrison, “Teamsters Out At Seaboard,” *Evening Telegram*, December 13, 1979; “Council Candidate Opposes Picket Ordinance Appeal,” *Evening Telegram*, September 24, 1981, on Naomi Green; United States Court of Appeals, Fourth Circuit, *IBT Local 391 v. City of Rocky Mount*, No. 81-1262, 672 F2d 376 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1982) Decided Feb 24, 1982. Jonathan G. Axelrod, “Common Obstacles to Organizing Under the NLRA: Combatting the Southern Strategy,” *North Carolina Law Review*, v. 59 (1980), 153.

Mount K-Mart store who protested unfair firings. The K-Mart workers' struggle led to the formation of the Black Workers for Justice with Alexander Evans as its first chairperson.<sup>129</sup>

More than anything else, white supremacist violence attempted to destroy the radical labor movement in North Carolina at the end of the 1970s. Though the core leadership did not change, the WVO changed its name to the Communist Workers Party (CWP) in October 1979. One month later, Ku Klux Klan and Nazi attack on an anti-Klan rally in Greensboro in November 1979 delivered a blow to the leadership of the CWP, and its affiliates ALSC and the NC TUEL. Four of the five CWP members killed in Greensboro served as TUEL leaders at Duke Hospital and the Cone Mills plants, including Jim Waller who had spoken at the August 20 sanitation strike rally in Rocky Mount. NC TUEL's work in Cone Mills came to a halt and the Duke Hospital union campaign struggled to rebound. Lucy and Chris Lewis left Roanoke Rapids and moved back to Durham to help regroup the CWP in the state following the trauma and loss of the organization's leaders killed or wounded in Greensboro. Shirley Pinnix married her boyfriend, former Cone Mills worker Elbert Richardson of Greensboro, and moved to Norfolk in 1981 for new organizing projects there and later moved to Bermuda. The Greensboro Massacre ushered in the decline of the "New Communist Movement" and a repressive chill on Left-led labor, Black worker movements and union organizing in the South: less strikes and less union elections.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> NC Trade Union Educational League, monthly meeting newsletter, December 10, 1978, in author's possession; "K-Mart Officials Answer Charges," *Evening Telegram*, January 8, 1982, 7; Saladin Muhammad, "Twenty Years of Black Workers for Justice," *Freedom Road* magazine, Spring 2001, 14-16, [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org), accessed November 13, 2020; Saladin Muhammad, "The Passing Of A Giant," remarks at funeral of Alexander Evans, August 21, 2007, in author's possession; Saladin Muhammad, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 21, 2018, Sanitation Strike Daily 122118, <https://youtu.be/ETdUaA8MP4A>, accessed March 10, 2023.

<sup>130</sup> James Wrenn, "The Greensboro Massacre," 279-280. Also, President Ronald Reagan's suppression of the air traffic controllers' strike in 1981 put the U.S. labor movement on the defensive with union organizing and strikes declining in the 1980s. At Duke Hospital, the union campaign resulted in a second vote in February 1979, which the

The legacy of the Rocky Mount sanitation workers strike, in spite of this repressive chill, breathed life into new expressions of Left-led and Black worker-led organizing after 1981. The sanitation workers maintained an informal network coming out of the strike, which BWFJ member Saladin Muhammad called a “powerful statement,” testifying to the importance of the strike’s legacy among the workers, namely the bond forged by successful collective action. Veteran Black activists Saladin and Naeema Muhammad along with Abner Berry, a Depression-era Communist Party leader, moved from Philadelphia to Naeema’s home town of Rocky Mount in the summer of 1981. The three comrades made a political decision to relocate to the Black Belt South and organize there. Later that year, they came to the aid of embattled Black women workers at the local K-Mart store, and along with Alexander Evans formed the Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ). Meanwhile, the Rocky Mount sanitation workers organized the City Workers Association in 1983. In August 1983, a delegation of ten sanitation workers joined Naomi Green, Saladin Muhammad, BWFJ members, and others on a bus from Rocky Mount to the twentieth anniversary of the March of Washington for Jobs and Freedom in D.C..<sup>131</sup>

Sanitation workers also continued their fight for political equity. They supported Naomi Green and three BWFJ members in filing the 1983 voting rights lawsuit against the at-large city

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union lost again, 995 to 761. Duke worker and WVO/TUEL activist Cesar Cauce, who led the organizing committee during the second campaign and thereafter, died in the Greensboro Massacre of November 3, 1979, setting back efforts for a third union election campaign. Instead, CWP activists remaining at Duke organized the Duke Workers Grievance Committee which advocated for hospital workers during the first half of the 1980s.

<sup>131</sup> Lucinda Trew, “Rocky Mount Rallies in D.C.,” *Evening Telegram*, September 4, 1983, 13 (Saladin Muhammad was also known as Phil White); Saladin Muhammad, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 21, 2018; Richard Petway, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 21, 2018. In Philadelphia, the Muhammads and Berry were members of the African Peoples Party (APP), a revolutionary nationalist organization with links to the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit. See Abdul Alkalimat, *Dialectics of Liberation*, 201-202.

council elections in Rocky Mount. BWFJ founding member Abner Berry joined Green as a plaintiff in the lawsuit to link Black workers to voting rights and African American self-determination. The successful court challenge resulted in a legal victory and led to the creation of a racially proportional ward system, thus realizing one of the broader goals of the 1978 strike. Significantly, even though Rev. Walker and ministers in the CCA advocated legal action in June 1978 to overturn the at-large voting system, working class activists Naomi Green and BWFJ members ultimately filed the lawsuit that secured Black voting rights in Rocky Mount. By 2003, Rocky Mount voters began electing a Black majority to the city council. Black majority leadership extended to Edgecombe County in 2008. Both represent major Black Belt achievements.<sup>132</sup>

Independent scholar Brandie Ragghianti had argued “the [sanitation workers] strike highlighted a winning strategy for labor activists-- negotiating without a contract through grassroots organizing, linking labor rights to civil rights and rallying community support-- that influenced future labor organizing in North Carolina.” Inspired by the victory of the sanitation workers strike, the BWFJ spread from Rocky Mount to Fremont, Raleigh, Whitakers, and across the state during the 1980s. In 1988, the BWFJ aided workers from the Schlage Lock plant in Rocky Mount in organizing a successful community-based mass campaign, similar to the sanitation strike ten years earlier, demanding severance pay and health benefits for workplace

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<sup>132</sup> Saladin Muhammad, “Twenty Years of Black Workers for Justice,” 15; Saladin Muhammad, interview by Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 21, 2018; James Wrenn, “Abner Berry,” *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 85-86;

Voting rights suit, “*Naomi Green, et. al. v. City of Rocky Mount, 1983.*” See comments of Sue Perry Cole and Saladin Muhammad, 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1978 Sanitation Workers Strike, October 13, 2018, video at [www.facebook.com/ThePhoenixHistoricalSociety/](http://www.facebook.com/ThePhoenixHistoricalSociety/). Plaintiffs included Naomi Green and BWFJ members Abner Berry, Peter White and Gary Banks, represented by Legal Services attorneys Sue Perry Cole and Brenda McGee.

illnesses after the company announced its plant closing. The BWFJ built on the Schlage victory to organize in-plant committees in Rocky Mount and statewide both in manufacturing and public sector workplaces. These worker committees, such as the Consolidated Diesel Workers Unity Committee in Whitakers and the UNC Housekeepers Association in Chapel Hill, led to the formation of the statewide N.C. Public Service Workers Union-UE Local 150 by 1997. Seven years later, UE Local 150 mounted a major organizing effort with the Rocky Mount City Workers Association, reviving the legacy of 1978. In 2023, with several thousand members across the state, UE Local 150 organizes on the frontlines of the labor movement in North Carolina, including among municipal, state, university and industrial workers.<sup>133</sup>

Saladin Muhammad explained the perspective of the BWFJ as “influenced by a trend that went back to the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in the late 1960s with their slogan ‘Black Workers Take the Lead’.” He distinguished the BWFJ from the New Communist Movement of the 1970s, which envisioned the African American liberation movement as led by a multi-racial communist party like the WVO/CWP. Rather, the BWFJ saw itself as part of a Black radical tradition and the active expression of Black workers’ leadership in the African American liberation movement as well as the U.S. workers’ union movement. The BWFJ promotes a social justice, rank and file unionism through UE Local 150, very similar to the Left-

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<sup>133</sup> Muhammad, “Twenty Years of Black Workers for Justice,” 16; Ragghianti, “An Argument for Statewide Significance;” Mariya Strauss, “Non-Majority North Carolina: Cummins Diesel Engine Workers Breathe New Life into an Old Organizing Model,” *New Labor Forum*, 24 (2), 2015, 106-110. The current president of the UE150 chapter at Consolidated Diesel Company in Whitakers, now called Cummins Rocky Mount Engine Plant, is Jimmie Thorne, the nephew of Naomi Green and grandson of Wardell and Annie Bynum, evidence of the Black radical tradition in Edgecombe continuing through three generations. George A. Chidi, “City Workers’ union limited by state law,” *Rocky Mount Telegram*, July 3, 2004, 1-2; for UE Local 150 today, see [www.ue150.org](http://www.ue150.org); Ajamu Amiri Dillahunt-Holloway, “Victory Through Struggle: Black Workers for Justice and the Fight for Economic and Environmental Justice in North Carolina,” *Journal of African American History* v. 108, no. 3 (Summer 2023).

led “civil rights unionism” of the FTA Locals 10 and 22 of the 1940s. UE Local 150 has moved away from the traditional contract-oriented business unionism of most AFL-CIO unions to offer an alternative for the labor movement in North Carolina and the South.<sup>134</sup>

The 1978 sanitation workers strike left a legacy for Black Power as well as labor. The workers’ victory sparked voter registration and a movement for change. Following Naomi Green’s strong but unsuccessful campaign for an at-large seat on the Rocky Mount City Council, CCA leaders Rev. Thomas Walker and Rev. J.O. Thorne, riding off the momentum of the sanitation strike victory, won election to the Edgecombe County Board of Commissioners in 1982, becoming the first Blacks elected to that board in over a hundred years. Certainly the sanitation strike victory added momentum to their campaigns. Leonard Giles later remarked, “The reason we were successful in 1978 is because we were standing on the shoulders of a giant...the citizens of Rocky Mount, because they were the only ones that supported us. The giant does not always sleep...as the giant begins to wake up, things are going to change.”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Muhammad, “Twenty Years of Black Workers for Justice,” 16; Saladin Muhammad, *The Black Working Class: The Workers, Trade Unions and Women’s Movement and the Fight for Black Liberation and Socialism* (Rocky Mount: Black Workers for Justice, 2019), 12. In 2012, the BWFJ and UE Local 150 joined with National Nurses United and ILA Local 1422 of Charleston, S.C., and others in forming the Southern Workers Assembly (SWA) to advance a grassroots worker organizing strategy across the South. Saladin Muhammad led the SWA until his death in September 2022.

<sup>135</sup> William West, Sign honors sanitation workers who was focus of 1978 strike,” *Rocky Mount Telegram*, February 19, 2022, 1. Edgecombe County has comprised an African American majority population since the 1840s, when enslaved Africans begin to outnumber whites, but the county had not been governed by a Black majority board of commissioners until 2008, except for brief periods after the 1876 and 1992 elections, which were subsequently reversed by the white minority. In 1992, the majority Black county board elected Rev. J.O. Thorne as chair of the Edgecombe Board of Commissioners. He passed in 1993. Dan Brannon, “Veteran Leader of Edgecombe dies at age 62,” *Evening Telegram*, August 1, 1993. The African American population of the city of Rocky Mount was 50% in 1990, 56% in 2000, 63% in 2010, and 2020 (U.S. Census). The city council shifted from 4 whites/3 Blacks to 4 Blacks/3 whites in the 2003 election. As of 2022 election, the city council consisted of 5 Blacks/2 whites.

However, these events eventually faded from many peoples' memories; generational change, a general lack of scholarly attention to eastern North Carolina and the absence of any public recognition help explain why. In 2018, the Phoenix Historical Society (PHS) of Edgecombe County endeavored to resurrect this history through a public commemoration of the strike's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The community embraced this history in ways that surpassed the PHS's expectations. In October 2018, upon a motion by councilman and NAACP president Andre Knight, the Black-majority Rocky Mount City Council voted to honor the sanitation workers, and issued an apology to the widow of Alexander Evans and the workers for the actions of the former city manager that had led to the 1978 strike. With council's support, the newly appointed Black city manager Rochelle Small-Toney commissioned her communications director, Tameka Kenan-Norman, to produce an hour long documentary on the strike, which relied on the research, participant interviews, and historical narrative provided by the PHS.<sup>136</sup>

Meanwhile, with the help of the North Carolina African American Heritage Commission, the PHS made the case for statewide significance of the strike to the North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Advisory Committee. Gaining its approval led to the unveiling of a state marker in Rocky Mount in September 2019, attended by more than two hundred people. Two months later, the city council issued restitution checks of \$1000 to each former striker or their

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<sup>136</sup> "Historical Society to Mark 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Sanitation Strike," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, September 1, 2018; Lindell John Kay, "City Council apologizes for historic strike," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, October 9, 2018, 1; "40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: City Apologizes for actions during 1978 sanitation strike," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, October 28, 2018, B1; City of Rocky Mount, *City Beat: Sanitation Strike Documentary*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWMgKZCdyks&feature=youtu.be>. The Phoenix Historical Society: African American History of Edgecombe County (PHS) organized in 2001, under first president the late Helen G. Quigless, Jr. Mavis Stith has served as third president of the PHS since 2010. The author has served as PHS vice president since 2001. Brenda Alvarez, "Rising from the Ashes," *Daily Southerner* [Tarboro, N.C.], November 14, 2001, 1.

surviving heirs as compensation for wages lost during the 1978 strike. The Black-majority council's decision to honor Black sanitation workers and provide reparations testifies to how much has changed as a result of the strike.<sup>137</sup>

Efforts have continued to raise the public awareness of this history. Delayed two years due to the Covid pandemic, the city council officially designated its Environmental Services Department with a sign declaring it the Alexander Evans Field Operations Complex in February 2022. The city unveiled the outdoor sign at a well-attended ceremony that featured remarks from Marjorie Evans, city councilman Reuben Blackwell, strike leader Leonard Giles, and James Wrenn of the PHS. Less than three months after suffering a severe heart attack, Saladin Muhammad attended the ceremony and savored the moment, particularly because the bronze plaque honoring Evans, to hang inside of the city's Environmental Services Operations Center, included the words "influenced the formation of the Black Workers for Justice." The city also erected an historical narrative kiosk describing the 1978 strike, based on information provided by the PHS, near the state marker at the former site of the sanitation department on Atlantic Avenue, now part of Stith-Talbert Park.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Amelia Harper, "Historical marker honors Sanitation Strike," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, September 8, 2019, 1; William West, "City to compensate workers fired during the strike," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, November 23, 2019, 1; Rocky Mount City Council Minutes, November 25, 2019, 364. Katherine Mellen Charron, "Class Trip Explores Peoples' History of Civil Rights," October 11, 2017, <https://history.news.chass.ncsu.edu/2017/10/11/african-american-public-history-at-the-grassroots/>, accessed May 14, 2023. Following the tour of Edgecombe County in 2017, Professor Charron's class urged the PHS members to nominate a state historical marker for the 1978 sanitation strike. This public history story includes the role of the NC State graduate student seminar (HI 563, Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in American Memory) in interacting with the Phoenix Historical Society in the process of memorializing the 1978 sanitation strike.

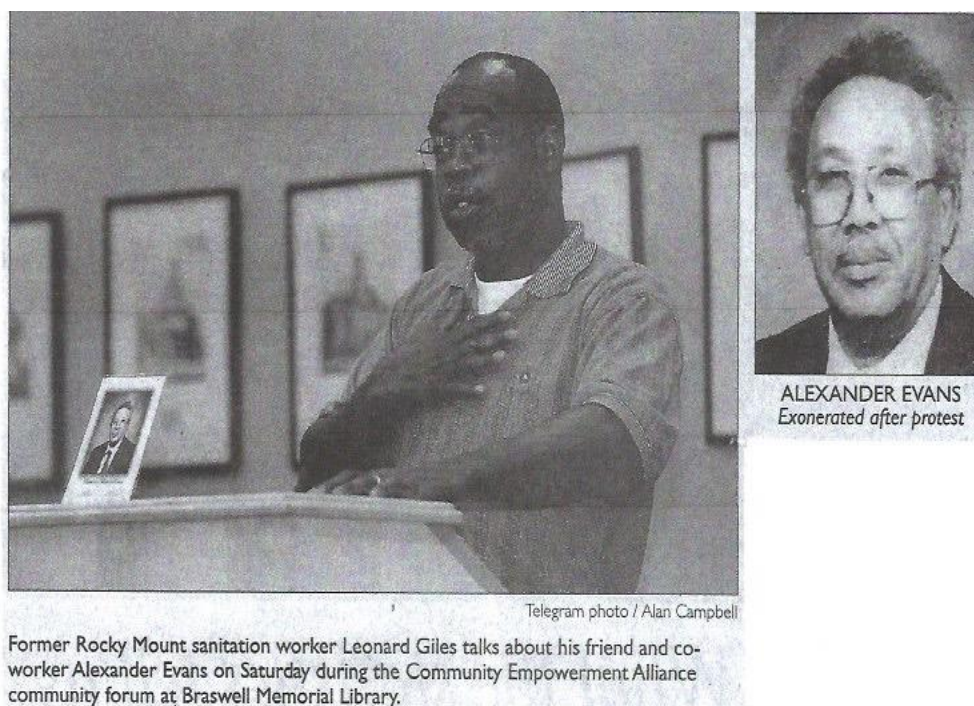
<sup>138</sup> William West, "Sign honors sanitation worker who was focus of 1978 strike," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, February 19, 2022, 1. Saladin Muhammad (1946-2022) passed away later that year. William West, "Labor leader helped lead fight for human rights," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, October 15, 2022, 1.

Rocky Mount and Edgecombe County stand on the frontline of the struggle for Black political and economic power in North Carolina today. Long home to a Black-majority population, this area finally achieved Black-majority elected governments in the last fifteen years. These governments in turn have made changes benefitting the African American population and directed municipal and business investment to the majority-Black Edgecombe side of Rocky Mount amid a continual white backlash and attack that recalls the Reconstruction era. With guidance from working class, Black-led grassroots organizations like the PHS, they have altered the public landscape to ensure that this history will not be forgotten. The wider Black community has embraced the history of the 1978 sanitation workers strike to undergird their current project for African American empowerment and to center the strike within a longer historical narrative of the long struggle from slavery to freedom. As Rev. Thomas Walker, who served on to the Edgecombe County commissioners from 1982 to 1994, recently reflected, “the sanitation workers strike became the beginning of a new Rocky Mount.” He referred to the changes achieved since 2003 under the leadership of a Black-majority government, and the linking the workers’ strike for dignity and empowerment to voting rights. In the words of Rocky Mount city councilman Reuben Blackwell, “The 1978 Rocky Mount sanitation workers strike changed Rocky Mount forever.”<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Today in 2023, Rocky Mount is the most populous Black majority city in North Carolina and Edgecombe County is the most populous Black majority county in the state. Rev. Thomas L. Walker, interview with Tameka Kenan-Norman, December 13, 2018, Sanitation Strike Daily for 121318, <https://youtu.be/5T2H8XPmuv4>, accessed March 7, 2023; Reuben Blackwell, 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1978 Sanitation Workers Strike, October 13, 2018, [www.facebook.com/ThePhoenixHistoricalSociety/](http://www.facebook.com/ThePhoenixHistoricalSociety/).

The sanitation workers' legacy in the labor movement and local Black political power flowed from their bold decision on the morning of July 25, 1978, to put their jobs on the line for a co-worker and walk out on strike. No one could foresee either the short term or long term consequences of this one act. Yet, as Leonard Giles understood: "You've got to have a vision. If you're blessed to be born with a vision, then you just can't sit back. When you're called forth, you have to act no matter what the cost." The sanitation workers' legacy offers all of us a lesson about courage and the need to stand for justice regardless of the cost.<sup>140</sup>



**FIGURE 14:** Leonard Giles speaking at 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1978 strike, August 30, 2008. (*Rocky Mount Telegram*, August 31, 2008, 3A.)

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<sup>140</sup> Leonard Giles, interview by Kieran Taylor, SOHP, 65.

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**APPENDICES**

## APPENDICES

- A. Timeline of events in the 1978 Rocky Mount Sanitation Workers Strike.
- B. George Dudley, "He Feels Good When He Helps Other People," *Evening Telegram*, [Rocky Mount, N.C.], November 25, 1977.
- C. March from Weeks-Armstrong Project to Tom Stith Park, July 30, 1978, *News & Observer* [Raleigh, N.C.], July 31, 1978.
- D. "Workers Discuss Return," July 31, 1978. *Evening Telegram*, July 31, 1978.
- E. "Striking sanitation workers picket city hall," *The Graphic*, [Nashville, N.C.], August 15, 1978.
- F. Leonard Giles speaking to ALSC Conference, August 19, 1978, *Workers Viewpoint* [New York, N.Y.], September 1978.
- G. March from City Lake to Tom Stith Park, August 20, 1978, *The Graphic*, August 22, 1978.
- H. "A News Conference, 8/30/78," Concerned Citizens Association, original copy given to author by Alexander Evans.
- I. "Workers Celebrate King Holiday," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, January 25, 1998, 6B.
- J. 1998 MLK Day Celebration at Bloomer Hill Honors Alexander Evans and Rocky Mount Sanitation Workers, *Rocky Mount Telegram*, January 25, 1998, 6B.
- K. "City Council Apologizes for Historic Strike," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, October 9, 2018.
- L. "40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary," *Rocky Mount Telegram*, October 28, 2018.
- M. N.C. Highway Historical Marker unveiling, September 7, 2019, [www.ncmarkers.com](http://www.ncmarkers.com).
- N. "City to compensate workers fired during strike." *Rocky Mount Telegram*, November 23, 2019.
- O. Marjorie Evans and daughter Bonita Evans Nettles at city's historic kiosk on the 1978 strike, January 2022. Photo by Jonathan Nettles.
- P. City of Rocky Mount designates "Alexander Evans Field Operations Complex," February 18, 2022. Sons of Alexander Evans, Lloyd Evans, Sr. and Alexander Demetrius Evans, unveil marker. Rev. Thomas L. Walker looks on. *Rocky Mount Telegram*, February 19, 2022.
- Q. Saladin Muhammad, Mavis Stith, James Wrenn, Ajamu Dillahunt, Rukiya Dillahunt, Richard Petway, Kathy Knight with city plaque honoring Alexander Evans, including the words "influenced the formation of Black Workers for Justice," February 18, 2022. Photo by Ajamu Amiri Dillahunt-Holloway.

A.Timeline of events in the 1978 Rocky Mount Sanitation Workers Strike

- June 20: Alexander Evans picked up suit of clothes left near trash at 220 West View Park Drive. Residents complain to city and Evans returned clothes to supervisor next day.
- July 5: Evans suspended by city and arrested by police and charged with larceny.
- July 10: Sanitation workers do not start work until meeting city manager (1<sup>st</sup> walkout).
- July 11: Sanitation workers do not start work until meeting city manager (2<sup>nd</sup> walkout).  
Workers call for charges on Evans to be dropped and apology from city.
- July 17: CCA leaders met with mayor, city manager and human relations director. CCA leaders informed workers that human relations director will see that charges are dropped by Monday, July 24 at 4:30pm.
- July 24: Charges against Evans are not dropped by 4:30pm as workers expected.
- July 25: Sanitation workers began strike (3<sup>rd</sup> walkout).
- July 26: Mass meeting at North End Baptist Church.
- July 27: Evans' District Court date continued to August 3.
- July 28: Workers and supporters picket sanitation department site on Atlantic Avenue.
- July 30: March from Weeks Armstrong Housing Project to Tom Stith Park.
- July 31: City agreed to reinstate workers.
- August 1: Workers returned to work. Mass meeting at North End Baptist Church.
- August 3: Evans' District Court date continued to August 10.
- August 10: District Court Judge ruled Evans guilty of larceny. Evans appeals to Superior Court.
- August 11: Workers and supporters got permit to begin picket of city hall on Main Street.
- August 14: Sanitation workers strike in protest of District Court ruling (4<sup>th</sup> walkout).
- August 19: African Liberation Support Committee national conference at Franklinton Center at Bricks near Whitakers. Sanitation worker Leonard Giles speaks to 350 attendees.
- August 20: March from City Lake to Tom Stith Park. Over 1,000 people attend.
- August 21: CCA began boycott of downtown Rocky Mount businesses.
- August 23: Mass meeting at Mt. Pisgah United Presbyterian Church.
- August 27: Mass meeting at Ebenezer Baptist Church.
- August 30: CCA Press Conference announced workers and city manager negotiated return to work. Boycott of downtown businesses cancelled. Future goals outlined, including challenge to racially unfair at-large system of election to city council.  
"This matter is not over, it has just begun."
- August 31: Workers returned to work without retaliation.
- September 3: Unification rally in Tom Stith Park.
- September 25: Nash County Superior Court jury ruled Evans not guilty.  
Evans returned to work for city until retirement twenty years later.

Source: Rocky Mount, N.C., *The Evening Telegram*, July 10, 1978 – September 26, 1978.

## People

# He Feels Good When He Helps Other People

GEORGE DUDLEY  
Telegram Staff Writer

City refuse (garbage) collectors are often brawny men. They have good backs, strong arms and big hands. Alexander "Preacher" Evans also has a big heart.

Evans, 43, got the name, Preacher, from his co-workers in the city's sanitation department.

"They call me that because of my religious background," he said. The Whitakers resident and father of six is a Missionary Baptist who is a member and a deacon of Ivory Hill Baptist Church in the Eastman Community near Enfield.

He also manages, sings in and plays guitar for a 25-year-old gospel music quartet called the Spiritual Echoes.

Preacher Evans' "religious background" probably accounts for his favorite leisure time activity—helping people.

"What I like to do most when I get off is to try to help somebody less fortunate than I am," he said. "Like this widow lady yesterday (Tuesday). I helped her by fixing her water line which had a bad cut-off valve."

Some of Evans' civic duties, such as being secretary-treasurer of the Bloomer Hill Water Association and president of the Bloomer Hill Development Club, also attest to his interest in lending a helping hand.

"Mr. (Ernest) Taylor (his supervisor) has been pretty nice to me for giving me the privilege (of time) to do these different things," he said.

### Valuable Refuse

It's not unusual to hear tales of valuable finds by refuse collectors and Evans is no exception, although the prize discarded items are puzzling to him.

"It's amazing to find some of the things people will throw away. The other day I found a brand new pair of pants that the label hadn't even been taken off of," he said. "It's puzzling about some of the things people throw away."

Despite the misgivings many would have about a job that involves collecting other people's trash, Evans is happy with his position.



ALEXANDER 'PREACHER' EVANS

His co-workers are responsible for that.

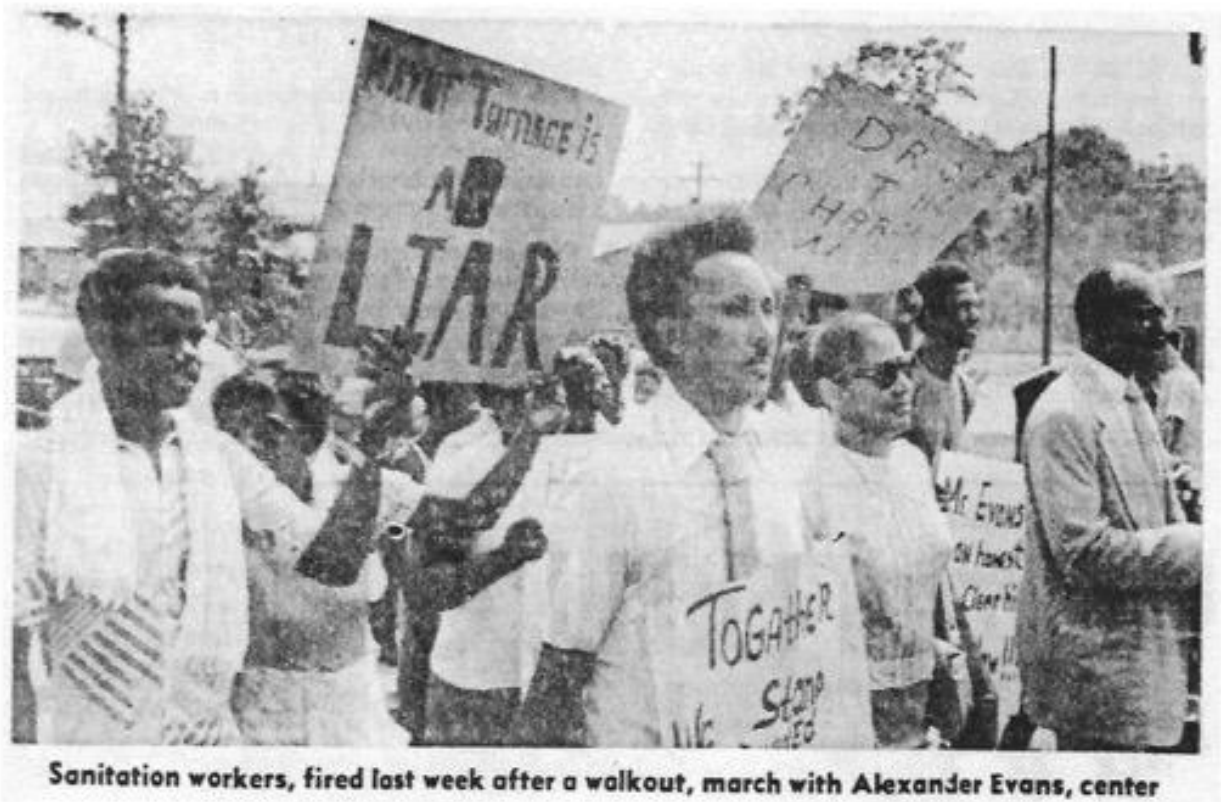
"Whenever they need some extra help, they always ask for Preacher because they think I'm good help. That makes me feel good," he said. "I'm not trying to outdo anybody. I'm just used to moving fast. If I walk slow, I get bored."

Evans is sort of an all-around man for the sanitation department. He fills in where he's needed whether emptying garbage cans or driving one of the large front-end loaders.

The nine-month department employee was eager to express his gratitude to some of the fellow workers who have helped him to learn his job.

"Some of the people who have helped me most are Henry Mercer and Grover Howard and Ephraim Epps," Evans said.

Perhaps Preacher is just a good example of the help helpers get.



C. March from Weeks-Armstrong Project to Tom Stith Park, July 30, 1978.  
(*News & Observer* [Raleigh, N.C.], July 31, 1978)



**WORKERS DISCUSS RETURN**—Rocky Mount sanitation workers huddle to discuss return to work during a meeting this morning with City Manager Bill Batchelor. All of the workers, who were fired after walking off the job Tuesday morning, were reinstated this morning and will be on the job Tuesday. (Telegram photo by Buchanan)

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# THE EVENING TELEGRAM

## *Local, Area News*

Rocky Mount, N.C. Telegram

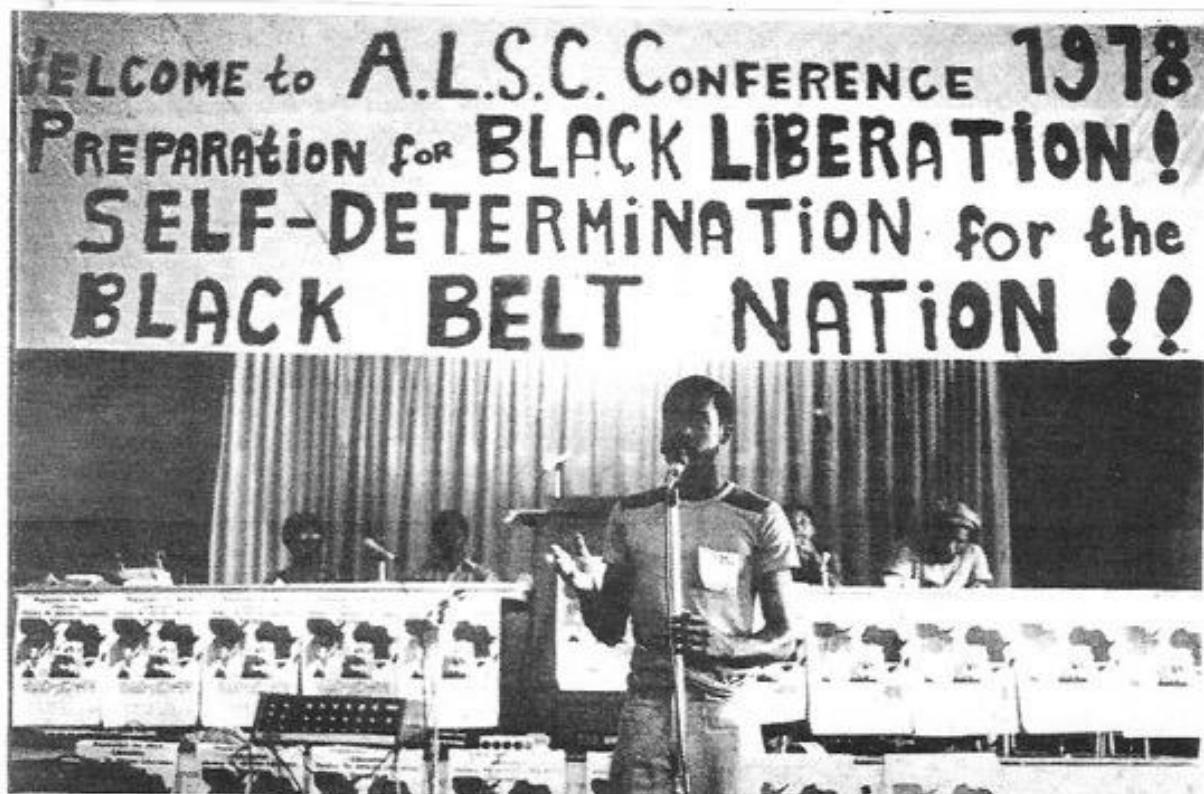
Mon., July 31, 1978-9

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**D.** Workers Discuss Return to Work.  
(*Evening Telegram* [Rocky Mount, N.C.], July 31, 1978, 9)



E. Workers Picket City Hall. (*Graphic* [Nashville, N.C.], August 15, 1978)



A worker from the Rocky Mount sanitation workers' strike gives solidarity message at the conference. ALSC, along with a group of community organizations and churches organized a demonstration to support the strike on the following day at Rocky Mount.

F. Leonard Giles speaking to African Liberation Support Committee national conference at Franklinton Center at Bricks, Whitakers, N.C., August 19, 1978.  
(*Workers Viewpoint* [New York, N.Y.], September 1978)



**MARCH HELD**—Supporters of striking city sanitation workers held a protest march and rally in Rocky Mount Sunday. Approximately 600 people attended, according to city police department estimates. The workers are demanding that misdemeanor larceny charge against co-worker Alexander Evans be dropped or that the case be given a speedy trial in Nash County Superior Court. [Graphic photo by J. A. Trotter.]

- G.** March from City Lake to Tom Stith Park, August 20, 1978.  
 (Graphic [Nashville N.C.], August 22, 1978)

H. "A News Conference, 8/30/78," Concerned Citizens Association.

A NEWS CONFERENCE

8/30/78

The Sanitation Workers after having suffered financial distress and mental anxiety are returning to work as a result of clarification proposals of City Manager, Bill Batchelor, in a memorandum dated 8/28/78. Therefore, officials of CCA are calling for an end to the boycott of downtown merchants. CCA officials met on 8/28/78 with the Sanitation workers and on 8/29/78 with the Rocky Mount Ministerial Conference to consider the proposals presented to the workers by the City Manager. The proposals are:

1. Any future walkouts by any employee will result in immediate dismissal.
2. Any work slowdown will result in disciplinary action in accordance with the City Personnel Ordinance.
3. Any violation of City Personnel Ordinance will result in dismissal or disciplinary action.
4. All of the above conditions are to apply uniformly to all employees who do not have any excused absence for the period August 14 - August 25, 1978.

Upon our review we recommended to the City Manager in a meeting of 8-29-78 that these proposals be accepted with the following revisions:

1. Any future walkouts (related to the Evans' Case) result in dismissal.
2. That work slowdown be specified in accordance with the City Personnel Ordinance.
3. That possible violations of the City Personnel Ordinance be enumerated which could result in dismissal or disciplinary action.
4. This proposal constitutes a failure on the part of the City Manager to accept the terms of unconditional reinstatement presented on August 23, 1978 by the workers.

We are especially grateful for the role played by the Rocky Mount Ministerial Conference and our Councilman, Rev George Dudley for

their role played in encouraging the men to return to work and negotiating to that end.

CCA will continue to support these workers and will work toward the exoneration of Mr. Evans. Although Mr. Evans has not been cleared through the courts at this point, we do feel that the matter will be resolved and that he will be found innocent in the appeal of our attorneys to higher court. We would like to note a few points for clarification.

A. The Sanitation Workers resorted to walkouts and picketing due to the failure of the City Manager to handle Evans' matter administratively. We are aware that the City Personnel Policy and practices cannot be administered in the streets or the news media, as stated by Mr. Batchelor in his memorandum dated 8-28-78. We must, however, recognize the fact that the city of Rocky Mount has a system of election of officials that deems it necessary for its minority citizens to resort to the street and news media to have their opinions heard. The present election system should be replaced with an absolute Ward System making it possible for the 40% Black population and a vast low income white population to have representatives on City Council. Such a system would make the Councilmen more accountable to the people who elect them. A new system would enable the citizens to have officials who are more sensitive to their needs; hence, the City Manager would be forced to be more considerate of all City Employees. Furthermore, if this present system is not replaced by a more equitable system, many other citizens both Black and White will have to take to the streets to be heard.

B. Fund raising efforts will continue due to the returning workers need of funds to support their families for the next three weeks pending their receipt of their first pay check and to pay legal fees. Contributions

may be paid at Thorne's Cleaners, 504 Rose St, Rocky Mount or Your Church Supply Store, 112 Tarboro St., Rocky Mount.

C. CETA employment reduction will be monitored by CCA and the Ministerial Conference and proper authority has been contacted to determine the legality of this reduction.

D. In reply to Mr. Batchelor's statement concerning the desire of the City to have a work force who provides the best service possible, we feel that this is the status of the current work force. The Environmental Service Department, according to Mr. Batchelor past statement, "Is the best we have ever had." It is through an administrative error that this matter has come this far. The Sanitation Workers have continuously met with Mr. Batchelor in an effort to promote a better work environment.

There will be a unification rally on Sunday, September 3, 1978 at Tom Stith Park at 4:00. The purpose of this rally is to unify our people, to Clarify the conditions regarding the Evans' case, and to point out that the conditions are merely symptoms of what "ails" Rocky Mount.

In addition to the rally we are planning to implement our supplication move.

What has been gained by this long conquest?

1. The men have continued to affirm that an injustice has been done to Mr. Evans and all Sanitation workers.
2. The men have demanded respect for their dignity and pride.
3. The amplification of this problem has pointed out the presence of many problems in the City's employment and promotion practices:
  - a. A poor Affirmative Action Program
  - b. Blacks occupy the blue collar jobs and white occupy the white color jobs.
4. Hopefully, this long conformation has allowed Rocky Mount and its citizens to take another long look at itself and recognize the many inequalities and injustices present in schools, housing, hiring practices, etc.

We must emphasize that this matter is not over, it has just begun. I feel that we have spent the past six weeks diagnosing the case and in the process of writing the prescription.

The Suffering of the Sanitation Workers and of the Rocky Mount Community is a price that must be paid for democratic government and freedom. We are grateful for the public support of all races, groups and organizations. We speak in humility.

## Workers celebrate King holiday

By Viola Harris  
Staff writer

WHITAKERS — Congresswoman Eva Clayton was the keynote speaker for the 8th annual Martin Luther King Day Celebration hosted by the CDC (Consolidated Diesel Co) Workers Unity Committee/United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers and the Bloomer Hill Community Association Jan. 19.

Other speakers for the event were Princeville's newly elected Mayor Delia Perkins and James Knight of the Rocky Mount City Workers for Justice.

This event began eight years ago after workers at CDC petitioned the company for a paid holiday on King Day.

After eight months of campaigning, the company agreed to make King Day a paid holiday for its employees.

"After that happened, the CDC workers unity committee decided to spend the holiday in celebration with the African American community of Bloomer Hill just adjacent to the plant," committee member Jim Wrenn said.

"The event has continued to grow in popularity and in its focus on issues of justice in the community and workplace today as the best way to honor the cause of Dr. King."

Clayton encouraged the workers to continue their fight for equality in the workplace. She commended them for their dedication to one another.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the month-long strike of Rocky Mount sanitation workers in the summer of 1978. Evans was involved in an

accusation of theft, but later exonerated and reinstated.

The CDC Workers Unity Committee presented Evans and James Knight with Certificates of Achievement for their continued support and commitment to workers everywhere.

"I was really surprised to receive this award," Evans said. "I thank God for all of the people who supported me back then and now. It was a terrible time in my life. But I knew that God would work things out for those who do right."

Evans returned to his job and retired in 1996.

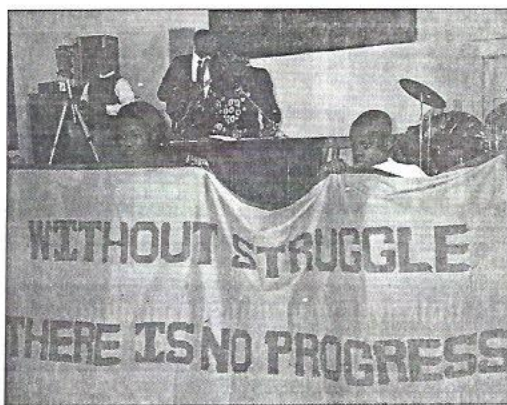
The Committee selected as its theme for the year, "Stand up for your rights." It also started a new tradition with a plaque

"Pioneers of the Struggle," of which Evans became the first recipient.

Committee member Joyce Whitehead said, "it took a lot of courage for men like Mr. Evans to stand for what was right. He had to defend his actions. We will add names each year and the plaque will hang in the Bloomer Hill Community Center."

Wrenn said that he was most impressed with the Workers for Justice when they started their fight in 1978.

"They showed solidarity and the kind of brotherly love that Dr. King stood for," Wrenn said. "It all started on a snow day 20 years ago. How fitting that we celebrate it on another snow day here in 1998."



CDC committee member Joyce Whitehead introduces area youth as they host a parade of banners during a special celebration at the Bloomer Hill Community Center honoring Martin Luther King Jr.

**L** Workers Celebrate King Holiday.  
(Rocky Mount Telegram, January 25, 1998, 6B)



Telegram/Viola Harris

Consolidated Diesel's Jim Wrenn presents achievement awards to Rocky Mount sanita-

tion workers James Knight, center, and Alexander Evans.

**J.** 1998 Martin Luther King Day Celebration at Bloomer Hill Honors Alexander Evans and Rocky Mount Sanitation Workers. (*Rocky Mount Telegram*, January 25, 1998, 6B)

# Rocky Mount TELEGRAM

*Serving the Twin Counties since 1910*

ROCKY MOUNT, NORTH CAROLINA ■ TUESDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2018

75 cents



## City Council apologizes for historic strike

BY LINDELL JOHN KAY  
Staff Writer

The Rocky Mount City Council apologized Monday night to sanitation workers who were involved in a civil rights struggle four decades ago.

The council unanimously approved a resolution recognizing the 40th anniversary of the Sanitation Workers Strike. After hearing from members of the public, Councilman An-



**KNIGHT**

dre Knight made a motion for the resolution to include an apology.

"We don't need to wait until another meeting, let's do it now," Knight said.

Alexander Evans, a black sanitation worker, was convicted for stealing a suit of clothes left by trash cars in

the white Englewood neighborhood of west Rocky Mount. His co-workers went on strike and the black community boycotted downtown businesses.

A jury later found Evans not guilty. He returned to work and continued on the job until his retirement 20 years later.

The result is considered the major civil rights and labor struggle in Rocky Mount and Nash and Edgecombe counties history,

according to the Phoenix Historical Society.

The Rev. Thomas Walker, who helped resolve the matter, told the council he didn't want the resolution to be a token gesture.

"We don't need this to be symbolic," Walker said. "Some of you on the council wouldn't be there if not for these men."

Walker said hardhat workers are the ones who really run a city.

Councilman Rueben Blackwell compared Walker to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and Evans' wife to Rosa Parks. Blackwell said because of the sacrifice of men who picked up trash and were treated like trash, Rocky Mount was changed for everyone.

The society will present a program on the significance of the strike at 1 p.m. Saturday at the BTW Community Center on Pennsyl-

vania Avenue in Rocky Mount.

In other business, the council corrected a procedural mistake concerning tourism signage then properly voted to approve six destination districts.

The council, also approved the provision of six school resource officers and tabled discussion on an agreement with Edgecombe Community College to share downtown parking.

**K.** City Council Apologizes for historic strike.  
(Rocky Mount Telegram, October 9, 2018)

ROCKY MOUNT TELEGRAM, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2018 B1

# AM COMMUNITY



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

The Rocky Mount City Council passed resolution recognizing the 1978 Rocky Mount sanitation workers strike and honoring the courage of the workers and also apologized to the family of Alexander Evans and to the sanitation workers for the actions of the city administration in 1978. Among those present were former workers Leonard Giles, Willie Moody and Robert "Pee Wee" Smith, Marjorie Evans (widow of Alexander Evans), and others from Evans family & Bloomer Hill community, Jean Ann Pryor, daughter of Naomi Green, theRev Thomas Walker, members of Rocky Mount City Workers-UE Local 150, Saladin Muhammad of the Black Workers for Justice, attorney Sue Perry Cole and members of the Phoenix Historical Society.

## 40TH ANNIVERSARY

### City apologizes for actions during 1978 sanitation strike

**L** 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.  
(Rocky Mount Telegram, October 28, 2018)

## North Carolina Highway Historical Marker Program

[Return to Marker](#)

ID: E-125

Marker Title: SANITATION WORKERS' STRIKE

Location: NC 97 (Atlantic Avenue) at Spruce Street in Rocky Mount

County: Edgecombe



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- M.** Left to Right: Rudolph Edmondson (striker), Rev. Richard Joyner (city council), English Edmondson (striker), Jean Pryor (daughter of Naomi Green), T.J. Walker (city council and grandson of Rev. Thomas Walker), at N.C. Highway Historical Marker unveiling, September 7, 2019. (Source: [www.ncmarkers.com](http://www.ncmarkers.com) )

# Rocky Mount TELEGRAM

*Serving the Twin Counties since 1910*

ROCKY MOUNT, NORTH CAROLINA

\$1.50

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2019



**Firebirds get past Knights**

SPORTS, B1

## City to compensate workers fired during strike

BY WILLIAM F. WEST  
Staff Writer

The Rocky Mount City Council on Monday is scheduled to financially compensate sanitation workers who were fired but reinstated after having gone on strike in 1978.

A copy of the agenda of the council's 4 p.m. regular meeting includes a resolution to provide an honorary restitution of \$1,000 to each former employee and to each of the families of deceased former employees.

The honorary restitution will represent a week's pay

and benefits, adjusted for inflation, for each employee who was fired and reinstated in 1978.

Municipal records, as part of Monday's council agenda, said 36 participated in the strike and that the total amount to be allocated for the honorary restitution is capped at \$36,000.

The strike protested the arrest and suspension of sanitation worker Alexander Evans, an African-American, for allegedly stealing a man's suit left out on his garbage route in the predominantly white Englewood residential area.

The striking sanitation workers were fired by the municipal government on July 25, 1978, and were reinstated on July 31, 1978.

Municipal records, as part of Monday's council agenda, said the length of time since the strike and the destruction of prior records, consistent with state law, prevented city staff from obtaining a full accounting of all employees who had participated in the strike.

The records said city staff initially can confirm the participation, termination and reinstatement of Evans and eight other workers.

Evans, of Whitakers, was convicted in Rocky Mount District Court of committing misdemeanor larceny, but eventually he was cleared by a jury in Nash County Superior Court.

Evans resumed working for the sanitation department and remained on the job until his retirement, reportedly never resentful about what happened to him in 1978.

Evans died in 2007 at age 72 after an ongoing illness.

Additionally, the strike became a catalyst for the

See **COUNCIL**, A5



FILE PHOTO/ROCKY MOUNT TELEGRAM

Former Rocky Mount sanitation worker Leonard Giles, second from left, and Jean Pryor, right, help unveil the new N.C. Highway Historical Marker in honor of the sanitation workers strike on Sept. 7 at the intersection of Atlantic Avenue and Spruce Street.

**N.** City to compensate workers fired during strike.  
(Rocky Mount Telegram, November 23, 2019)



**O.** Marjorie Evans and daughter Bonita Evans Nettles at city’s historic kiosk, January 2022. (photo by Jonathan Nettles)

## Alexander Evans Ceremony

Feb 18, 2022



### P.

City of Rocky Mount names “Alexander Evans Field Operations Complex,” February 18, 2022.

Sons of Alexander Evans unveil marker:

Lloyd Evans, Sr. on left of sign and Alexander Demetrius Evans on right of sign.

Rev. Thomas L. Walker, third from left, looks on.

*(Rocky Mount Telegram, February 19, 2022)*



**Q.** Saladin Muhammad with Mavis Stith, James Wrenn, Ajamu Dillahunt, Rukiya Dillahunt, Richard Petway, Kathy Knight at Evans ceremony, February 18, 2022.  
(photo by Ajamu Amiri Dillahunt-Holloway)