

# All Labor Has Worth

By Joe Atkins, Jackson Free Press  
Oct. 11, 2012



Joe Atkins

**OXFORD** – On the evening of March 18, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. addressed striking sanitation workers in Memphis, and this is what he told them:

“All labor has worth. ... Don’t despair. Nothing worthwhile is gained without sacrifice. The thing for you to do is stay together. ... Let it be known everywhere that along with wages and all of the other securities that you are struggling for, you’re also struggling for the right to be organized and be recognized.”

Seventeen days later, King was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in downtown Memphis.

The next year, a great leader of both the civil rights and labor movements, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters founder A. Philip Randolph, had this to say: “The labor movement has been the home of the working man, and traditionally, it has been the only haven for the dispossessed; and therefore, I have tried to build an alliance between the Negro and the American labor movement.”

Josh Dedmond, Monica Atkins and Tyson Jackson want to build on the alliance King, Randolph and others envisioned four decades ago. They believe workers’ rights can be the civil rights movement of today.

That’s why they and other Jackson-area members of the newly formed Mississippi Student Justice Alliance are planning an “I Am” labor-and-civil rights conference in Jackson in late November. The conference is named after the “I Am A Man” sign sanitation workers carried in Memphis and will feature veterans of that 1968 strike.

“This is in the same vein as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee,” said Dedmond, 25, a recent Tougaloo College graduate in African American and religious studies. SNCC played a key role in the civil rights movement. “There is an enormous power in students regarding social justice issues. The two movements are inextricable from one another.”

The Mississippi Student Justice Alliance’s target: helping workers at the giant Nissan plant in Canton realize their goal of joining the United Auto Workers despite management’s disdain for that idea.

Dedmond, Atkins and Tyson are also now working with the UAW and its Global Organizing Institute, helping recruit and educate young people from around the world about labor issues.

**Mississippi Alliance for Fairness at Nissan**

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“We started figuring out about the workers at Nissan and how they wanted a fair election process,” said Atkins, 23, a Chicago native who graduated from Jackson State University in April. She said she decided to stay in Mississippi because “here, there is a lot more opportunity to make a difference.”

Making a difference in Mississippi can be an uphill fight. King and Randolph would be the first to tell them.

At the Nissan plant, pro-UAW workers not only face an anti-union CEO in Carlos Ghosn but also a conservative state with a union-hostile “right-to-work” law embedded in its constitution, a Republican-led legislature and a Republican governor who has publicly expressed support for outside groups that would help fight a union at Nissan or Toyota in Mississippi.

The striking workers in Memphis sought in 1968 “exactly what the Nissan workers are asking for,” said Jackson, 31, who studies political science at Tougaloo. “Respect.”

The UAW has laid the foundation for an all-out organization effort at the 3,300-worker plant. A network that includes U.S. Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., area ministers and civil rights-era veterans and activists has pledged to assist in the union’s call for an election free of intimidation.

Mississippi’s rich civil rights history was a factor in the UAW’s decision to take a stand in Canton. In the early 1960s, state NAACP leader and civil rights martyr Medgar Evers worked hand-in-hand with state AFL-CIO leaders Claude Ramsay, Thomas Knight and Ray Smithhart. Like other labor leaders in the South, they endured many defections of white members from their ranks as a result of their stand for civil rights.

Most of the workforce at the Nissan plant in Canton is African American. They make some of the best wages in a state that perennially ranks at the nation’s bottom in wage earnings. However, workers complain that they haven’t had a pay raise in years, have little or no say-so regarding working conditions, and face a constant barrage of anti-union propaganda.

Federal law guarantees workers have the right to organize and join a union without harassment. The truth is, however, workers across America now face the kind of hostility that Mississippians have known since segregationist Gov. Ross Barnett secured “right to work” as state law. They get little or no backing from Congress or the U.S. “Corporate” Supreme Court, and even some major Democrats seem antagonistic to unions.

If there’s to be a resurrection of the labor movement, the UAW seems poised to play the kind of pivotal role it played both in past labor and civil rights history. Its sit-down strikes in the 1930s helped establish modern-day labor. In the 1960s, UAW leader Walter Reuther marched alongside Martin Luther King Jr.

“When (police commissioner) Bull Connor is destroying freedom in Birmingham, he is destroying my freedom in Detroit,” Reuther said during the famous March on Washington in August 1963.

That’s the spirit—along with those of King and Randolph—that Redmond, Atkins and Jackson are hoping to rekindle in Mississippi.