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Mississippi State Workers' Long March to Power

Bill Chandler
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Abstract

[Excerpt] Mississippi is tough. It has a brutal history. Its plantation system enslaved blacks and oppressed most whites. Its segregation and racism divided workers. Bosses fearful that "their" workers may organize against them are rabidly anti-union. Workers are scared. Fear is real when you are not organized.

Yet in this hostile environment, where state workers win justice only through intensive legislative lobbying, the Mississippi Alliance of State Employees/Communications Workers of America has racked up impressive victories in the past four years. We have lobbied for and won the two largest pay raises ever given to state workers in the history of Mississippi and the largest in the U.S. in recent years, totaling a minimum of $3,600 per person annually. We got a bill passed by the legislature allowing sick leave for illness in the state employees' immediate family. We were the only group of state workers in the U.S. to defeat all privatization bills during the 1993 legislative session. We fought the illegal firing by Governor Kirk Fordice of four prison guards in retaliation for their political activity, and we were successful in getting them rehired with back pay. Overall, we have built credibility in the Statehouse and worked closely with a large group of legislators in drafting and passing or defeating bills affecting state workers.

These successes depended entirely on constant, face-to-face contact among union activists and union members and non-members. In an anti-union state, almost everything gained for state workers is the result of intensive mobilization. This involves gaining and displaying power and working inside the legislature. Workers see they can achieve results. Most important, their success comes through their own hard work to become a potent political body. They are no longer "serviced" by the union — they own that activity.

Average wages in Mississippi have always been the lowest in the U.S. The Knights of Labor and the Industrial Workers of the World organized in Mississippi on the principle of "one big union" for all workers, skilled or unskilled, black and white. Later, skilled whites organized into the American Federation of Labor's craft and railroad unions, but it was the Congress of Industrial Organizations' drives in telephone, clothing, textile, and electrical manufacturing that unionized tens of thousands of workers, black and white, in the private sector.

The long struggle of the civil rights movement has had the greatest impact on Mississippi. Enfranchisement of black voters led to the election of the largest number of black public officials of any state in the country. As a spinoff of the civil rights movement, more whites and poorer whites voted, electing many progressive and populist white officials, who were more sensitive to workers' concerns.

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EARLY EFFORTS

But state workers were not organized. For nearly two decades, an independent association collected $1.50 a month from state workers and hired a professional lobbyist to represent them in the legislature. The association’s membership and leadership were overwhelmingly white, although the overall workforce was more than 40% black. By 1989, Mississippi state workers were still the lowest paid, ranking 50th nationally, partly due to an ill-conceived, market-based “variable compensation” pay plan, which computes the “market value” of a worker by using a wage survey of regional government workers and the private sector in Mississippi.

With the association not meeting their needs and conditions worsening, workers began looking for alternatives. “We were very frustrated with our situation,” says Robert Mukes, a worker in the Division of Youth Services for 13 years before he became a full-time organizer. “We began forming a statewide organizing committee with interested state workers who were willing to take responsibility for reaching out to their co-workers and involving them. We circulated a petition calling for a
Bill of Rights for state employees. This gave us the tool to begin discussions with workers, and get their commitment to the idea of a real union.”

Brenda Scott, who then worked as an AFDC Food Stamp Eligibility worker in the Vicksburg Department of Human Services office, adds, “We had been complaining about the extremely high caseload, forcing most of us to come into work on weekends and working free overtime just to keep up. Our pay was very low, and on top of that I was slapping pizzas at Domino’s every night just to make ends meet for me and my children. I never heard of the association, but the Bill of Rights got our attention, and we all signed it.”

At a spring, 1989, meeting of the new organizing committee, MASE/CWA was born. The union assigned three organizers, and began meeting with hundreds of workers across the state who had signed the Bill of Rights petition. A big rally was organized in the summer of 1989. “The plan was to bring hundreds of workers to Jackson, actually beginning the union by all of us paying our first month’s dues, signing a bankdraft authorization for our monthly contribution, and beginning an issue agenda to work on,” says Scott who is now a full-time organizer and President of MASE/CWA. More than 600 state workers attended the rally, and 300 signed up and paid their first month’s dues. They adopted “Better Pay, Family Benefits, and Workers’ Rights” as their campaign slogan.

The organizing drive got a boost from a tragic event: one of its leaders, Argentra Cotton, a corrections officer in the infamous Parchman (“Farm”) State Penitentiary, was stabbed to death by an inmate. Cotton was assigned to a maximum-security unit with 65 violent inmates and only three correctional officers to guard them. MASE/CWA members displayed their grief and protested against severe understaffing by wearing black ribbons.

**LOBBYING THE LEGISLATURE**

Aware that the Mississippi legislature and the Governor control pay, benefits, and rights on the job for all state workers, the MASE/CWA Organizing Committee began organizing delegations of workers to meet with their own local legislators. In addition, they targeted legislators who were members of the House and Senate appropriations committees, who write the budgets that include pay and benefits of all state workers. These legislators are key to winning any pay raise.

Groups of workers across the state began setting up meetings with state legislators to persuade them to support the proposed pay raise. “We
wanted an across-the-board dollar-amount pay raise, not a percentage or ‘realignment’ of the variable compensation plan,” says Scott. “Percentages give the big raises to high-paid workers and crumbs to the low-paid. The variable compensation plan is just a very bad joke on state workers.”

The meetings with legislators and other activities got the attention of then-Governor Ray Mabus. In July, 1990, he announced his support for a state employee pay raise. The campaign began was building momentum. The organizing committee continued to reach out to co-workers and sign them into the union. In September, about 60 MASE/CWA statewide activists met in Jackson to plan their legislative agenda: a call for a $200-a-month, across-the-board pay raise for all state workers. They also demanded child care at cost, family leave, and an expansion of workers’ rights. MASE/CWA’s membership doubled.

As the membership expanded across Mississippi, new members immediately became involved in meetings with legislators. The rising pressure for a raise forced Governor Mabus to endorse a pay hike of $100 a month—the largest ever proposed by a governor of Mississippi. Legislative leaders offered 3%. MASE/CWA members stepped up pressure on legislators with letters and phone calls generated from their workplaces.

“Every Friday beginning in December, state workers wore black to say ‘We stand together for our pay raise,’” relates MASE/CWA Organizer, Betty Miller, a former Child Support Enforcement officer in the Department of Human Services. “We organized those solidarity actions in every county and workplace we had members, statewide. We held news conferences, actions, and rallies to get our story out to the public. Workers told their stories of what it meant to work for the lowest pay in the nation.”

When the legislature convened in January, the old association accepted the 3% offer, but MASE/CWA members continued pushing for the $200 hike. Letters and phones messages from state workers piled up on legislators' desks. To the surprise of the House leadership, a rebellion by pro-worker House members pushed through an amended pay bill upping the amount to $125 a month, a figure that Mabus signed into law in mid-March.

The raise made history. It was the largest wage increase won by any public workers in their first year of organizing in the country, and the biggest pay-raise bill in Mississippi state workers’ history.

The win also propelled the union, as workers began to see the results of their efforts. Workers held regular monthly meetings in over 30 areas of the state. They met with organizers to discuss issues, plan strategy, target workers to recruit, and take assignments. Every three months, there
MASE/CWA members protest health insurance cost increases inside the capital building in Jackson.

are statewide meetings of MASE/CWA leaders to review the campaign strategy, issues, and organizing.

We knew we could not build our power alone. As the union grew and workers became involved, they reached out to their churches and community organizations. MASE/CWA organizers sought help from thousands of Mississippi CWA members in telecommunications locals. MASE/CWA joined a coalition of client advocacy groups formed to improve state-delivered services to its members. That alliance gained the union valuable allies in the legislature.

Inside the legislature, MASE/CWA cemented ties with a bloc of African-American, populist, and progressive legislators who had supported the MASE/CWA pay-raise campaign.

**ANOTHER TOUGH FIGHT**

The pay-raise campaign showed state workers the value of organizing. It also prepared them for another tough fight. In 1991, state political leaders threatened to lay off workers and cut services to close a budget gap. This horrified union members. "Being laid off our jobs is serious. Many of us are knee deep in debt, paying on a mortgage—we were only two paychecks from being homeless," said Carol Carroll, a MASE/CWA leader from Madison County DHS. "When our co-worker's job is eliminated, our workload increases. A client dependant on Human
Services workers finds her benefits delayed. If you work in the Department of Corrections or in Mental Health, understaffing dramatically increases the threat of violence against workers.”

At a statewide organizing committee meeting in December, union activists made plans for a campaign to fight back against budget cuts. A massive telephone call-in campaign was organized. During December, state legislators were in their home districts. The Governor’s office had an 800 number. MASE/CWA members mobilized thousands of calls to him, and barraged their legislators too.

“This is the only way you are going to get the legislature to move,” said State Senator Alice Harden of Jackson. “You have to pressure us. You must organize much stronger than you are. You must talk, walk, and think union—be strong and focused to have the influence to protect and improve your jobs.” Responding to a wave of telephone calls, dozens of state legislators met with MASE/CWA members from their districts. The Governor agreed to meet with MASE/CWA, as well as state and national CWA leaders, to discuss the crisis. Forty MASE/CWA activists who attended a special meeting the evening before made a list of their concerns: Revenue must be raised; programs the state provides its residents must continue, and, if anything, be strengthened.

The Governor’s response was to hold to his revenue plan, but he also pledged to pay close attention to state employee’s concerns and to work with MASE/CWA in the effort to solve the crisis. Union leaders knew that there would be a real fight to break the impasse between the Governor and the legislature. If nothing happened by February, state checks would start bouncing.

Solidarity actions began immediately in January. More than 80 workers crowded into the Capitol rotunda and declared war on the state’s bud-
get crisis the day before the legislature convened. The Mississippi Human Services Coalition joined with the union in the campaign to raise revenue and prevent cuts and layoffs. Braving heavy rains and widespread flooding, more than 500 people jammed into the Capitol building on February 21 to deliver a clear message, calling for a revenue compromise, a long-overdue university workers' pay raise, and enactment of the mail-in voter registration bill. Wearing red to protest the threat of serious cuts, the group divided into delegations by legislative districts and met with 92 lawmakers.

To buttress the personal lobbying, thousands of red postcards were delivered to legislators during the legislative session with the message, “I want you to oppose any cuts in our state budget, any loss of services, and any layoff of the state employees who provide these services.” Workers wore red every Friday in a solidarity protest to “get the state out of the red.”

The persistent campaign by MASE/CWA, other unions, and supporters outside of labor produced some results. Legislators began shifting funds, enacting fee increases for some state services, and revising the revenue figures upward to add more money to the general fund. Our united effort saved most services and produced a measure of job security for at least the next year.

But 1991 was also an election year. Tracking voting records by the legislators on issues of concern to workers helped MASE/CWA members endorse and work on election campaigns. If a politician voted correctly on at least three-quarters of 12 significant legislative votes during the 1990 and 1991 sessions, the union supported that incumbent. Challengers to legislators who did not make the grade were interviewed by MASE/CWA members in their districts and supported if they were found to be progressive and committed on important worker concerns.
GOVERNOR FORDICE TAKES AIM AT THE UNION

While the election brought some improvement to the legislature, the defeat of progressive Governor Ray Mabus and the election of anti-union construction company executive Kirk Fordice to the Governor's office spelled trouble for state workers and their allies. "He lobbied in Washington against everything from the minimum-wage law to minority set-asides," said Neal Fowler, President of the Mississippi AFL-CIO.

Almost immediately upon being sworn in as Governor he brought his special brand of job terrorism to state government. He ordered massive increases in the premiums and deductibles for the State Employees Medical Benefits fund. Deductibles were raised from $150 and $200, to $500 for each worker and each dependent. Overnight, state workers lost a comprehensive health plan, which was suddenly reduced to major medical only.

Shock and anger among Mississippi state employees followed the announcement. In response the union mobilized a big Lobby Day. Governor Fordice retaliated by canceling the right of payroll deductions of union dues by Department of Corrections workers. MASE/CWA lost nearly 500 members. Union activists at Corrections faced a steep uphill battle to re-sign those members to bankdraft accounts. "Most Corrections workers are paid too little to afford bank accounts. We had to try to collect our dues by hand cash payments," said organizer Robert Mukes.

On the heels of the payroll deduction loss, Fordice announced he was going to furlough Corrections workers without pay three to four days a month to save the state money. Many workers were outraged, others felt intimidated.

More than 800 state workers took off vacation days off to come to Jackson on Lobby Day to tell Governor Fordice and the legislators, "No Furloughs, No Lay-offs, Fair Pay for Fair Work!"

Wearing red and led by pallbearers carrying a symbolic coffin with the sign, "Jobs With Justice Died in Mississippi," the union members marched to the Capitol. More joined along the way. "I was at the front of the march, and I could look down the hill and see our people still coming from the fairgrounds," said MASE/CWA member Charles Lampton of Youth Services, who helped lead the march.

When marchers reached the Capitol, the crowd swelled to over 1,000. Union leaders, workers, and progressive legislators greeted the workers who entered the Capitol to press their demands. "Can you live on $800 per month? Can you do it?" demanded a Corrections worker as he confronted Governor Fordice outside his office. Fordice refused to answer, retreated into his office, and slammed the door.
"It was impressive to watch the Corrections workers—whose agency administrators actively attempted to discourage from attending by canceling personal leave and furlough time—stand on the Capitol steps holding the largest banners, confront reporters and photographers, and sign the Governor's guest book," commented Judy Barber, a MASE/CWA leader in the Department of Health. "They believed what they heard from friendly legislators that we had a right and a responsibility to be at the Capitol to make our needs known and to support the legislation we need."

The weekend following the rally the governor announced to a surprised group of journalists that he was firing all the Corrections workers who attended Lobby Day. He claimed they came to Jackson in defiance of his orders to cancel all leave days for March 25. But when Fordice and his administrators at Corrections scrutinized employee records, they found that nearly all of the 80 corrections workers who attended were on a regularly scheduled day off. He found only four who used sick time on the 25th to attend Lobby Day. Fordice ordered them fired.

MASE/CWA aggressively defended the four and pursued their cases through the State Personnel Board's grievance process. At the close of the appeals hearing, the four were reinstated with back pay, suffering only a 30-day retroactive suspension.

Union members from 30 areas throughout Mississippi took turns getting personal leave in groups and came to lobby at the Capitol. “This daily effort by MASE/CWA members helped me and our progressive allies in the legislature win your pay raise with a veto-proof vote on both sides,” said Representative David Green, after a $1,600-a-year raise became law, despite the protestations of Governor Fordice. “There is absolutely no way the raise would have passed if it had not been for the activity by the MASE/CWA members. Others may claim credit, but we know who mobilized and did the work.”

One of the new black legislators, Representative Jim Evans of Jackson, who had been a public worker in New York before returning to his native Mississippi, clearly saw the threat of privatization and began to take the lead in the House against it. “The tenacity of the MASE/CWA
'shock-troops,' as I like to call them, resulted in the defeat of all privatization schemes by Republicans and so-called New Democrats alike," he said at a recent state worker rally in Jackson. "But in 1994, the session will be even worse."

He was right. Almost immediately after the 1993 legislative session had ended, one of Governor Fordice's appointees, Department of Human Services Executive Director Gregg Phillips, announced the termination of his employees' rights to payroll deduction for union dues. MASE/CWA has over 1,000 members in DHS, and most used payroll deduction for their dues. "This was a tremendous hit we took," says Earnest Simpson, MASE/CWA activist on the Gulf Coast. "It was clearly aimed at crippling the union." MASE/CWA went to court and won a temporary restraining order restoring dues deduction rights in DHS. The order was based on equal access for all voluntary employee organizations. Since the deduction rights were not canceled for the five credit unions, United Way, and the U.S. Savings Bond Club, DHS had to restore rights to MASE/CWA members.

But they did not stop there. Payroll deduction for all the other voluntary employee organizations were eliminated too, as Phillips attempted to circumvent the judge's order. "This is an unpatriotic act," said CWA State Director George Powell. "To block DHS employees from investing in their country with their savings bonds amounts to treason!"

Although a judge would again restore payroll deductions for DHS workers, the fight was fierce. As the 1994 legislative session opened, dozens of privatization schemes for agencies including the Health Department Home Health Services, all the Department of Corrections, as well as DHS, faced state workers. A bill to establish a commission to privatize all of state government was introduced by a senator with connections to David Duke.

The anti-worker onslaught has kept the union in a continual state of mobilization. Legislators have received a constant barrage of phone calls, letters, and visits from MASE/CWA activists. As a result, all privatization bills for Corrections were killed. "I guess I was the typical state employee. I did not realize the connection between our low pay, heavy workload, loss of benefits, and the political process. Then I joined MASE/CWA," said activist Debra Swanier, from the Gulf Coast. "I have learned that only if we build a strong organization of state workers can we have a chance to improve our lives in Mississippi."