ANNUAL REPORT 2020

A year for Organizing: Essential Workers, the fight to Defend Black Lives, and Building Power for Dignity and Liberation
Who We Are

Workers’ Dignity is a worker-led center organizing for economic and racial justice, and dignity for all. We are a successful, 10-year-old multi-campaign center building worker power in Middle Tennessee through organizing and leadership development.

Our main program areas include construction worker organizing, participatory democracy projects, wage theft recovery, and our worker-run radio station.

We are unapologetically committed to building multiracial community power, training ordinary people to take control of the conditions in our worksites and neighborhoods, and long-haul organizing needed to dismantle the grips of capitalism, anti-blackness, and white supremacy.

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Letter from the Co-Directors

Friends,

For many, 2020 will be a year remembered for its tragedy, isolation, and trauma. But it is also the year when our vision for freedom from exploitation and violence became even clearer, and the year we welcomed hundreds of people into the movement through our collective struggles for justice. Up against a global pandemic, the rise of right-wing extremism and fascism, the continued killing of Black people at the hands of the state, and governments and corporations that have failed our people, we have had no choice but to act.

We are proud to share the victories and the ways we showed up for our people in 2020. When the cascading crises of 2020 unfolded -- starting with March tornadoes, then the COVID-19 pandemic, then the murder of George Floyd and the nationwide uprisings for Black lives — we responded. We deepened our leadership development and training programs along with our mutual aid practices. We won immediate worksite improvements to safeguard against COVID-19, while still keeping our eyes on sustainable, long-term, pro-worker policy change. We joined with other base-building and movement organizations in Nashville to flex our power on issues that impact Black, Indigenous, people of color, and working class communities in Nashville.

We also celebrated our 10 year anniversary. If we had to share just one thing that we’ve learned in a decade of organizing, it’s that change is going to happen in the streets and in our communities. No politician, institution, celebrity, or boss is going to give us what we need and deserve. We are the ones who determine what we need, and the ones that fight for it.

The time to organize is now. If there are things you want to change in your workplace or community, we invite you to join us. We know that another world is possible, but the only way to win it is by building together with our people. We invite you to join us in the work, create solutions together, lean into our vision, and practice democracy.

Organizing is the long way, but it’s the only way.

Cecilia Prado, Co-Director
Erica Perry, Co-Director
Commercial Construction Campaign

Training & Solidarity during COVID-19

Construction workers have been essential throughout the pandemic.

Workers have had to face COVID-19 outbreaks and coverups on many worksites, on top of the daily hazards that come from working in an exploitative industry in the most dangerous city in the South for construction workers.

The Construction Committee is composed of 30 workers and their family members who have a clear vision for what the industry should look like, and are developing and driving the strategies to transform it.

Construction sites were some of the first places in Nashville where COVID-19 spread, and we responded to the chaos by listening to workers’ concerns and collaborating to create rapid response infrastructure to demand immediate safety and other protocols at major sites. We hired 2 interns from our membership to enhance our digital organizing capacity. In the early months of the pandemic, we:

• Led weekly Know Your Rights Trainings.
• Hosted virtual town halls to deliver mass trainings about our rights to organize and uplift success stories and partnered with local news sources to reach over 30,000 workers in Spanish and English.
• Formed rapid response teams to train and accompany workers in outreach to coworkers, develop demands and apply strategies to win immediate improvements.

On May Day, our 10th Anniversary, we organized a 50-car caravan in solidarity with fellow workers in construction, retail, and health care. Between March and June, we supported workers in winning hand washing stations, onsite testing, PPE and other safety measures, and transparent worksite reporting about COVID-19 outbreaks in multiple construction sites.

THANK YOU

To our National Partners for Assistance in Strategy Development, Training and Technical Assistance.

• Worker Driven Social Responsibility (WSR) Network
• Partners for Dignity and Rights
• Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en Lucha
• Jobs with Justice
• International Union for Painters and Allied Trades District Council 91
• National Council for Occupational Safety and Health
• The Southeast Immigrant Rights Network
Commercial Construction Campaign - Contd.

Not One More Death

On June 23, 2020, 16-year-old worker Gustavo Rameriz was taken from his family and community when he fell from 120 feet, without a safety harness, and died while building a downtown La Quinta Hotel. His death is a brutal reminder that we are fighting for our lives against developers and general contractors that will do anything to increase their profits at the expense of workers’ safety. We’ve supported Gustavo’s family and organized vigils, press conferences, and mobilized workers and supporters to pressure TOSHA to hold negligent companies accountable — resulting in the largest fine to date for a worker death in Tennessee. While this fine does nothing to bring back Gustavo, we refuse to let his death go and are taking every measure possible to force systemic change to health and safety. We are convening Metro Nashville policymakers, alongside union and community partners, to introduce local policy changes through a series of ordinances in 2021. Gustavo’s death only further emphasizes why our Construction Campaign is organizing to implement Worker-Driven Social Responsibility agreements. Workers know what we need to stay safe, and our leaders are fighting to be the ones to define, set and enforce our own standards, with penalties for general contractors for every violation on their worksite.

Fighting for dignity in Metro Nashville Public Schools

How actions by a small group of concrete workers have turned into a strategic campaign to raise standards for all construction workers on MNPS sites.

In Summer 2019, 11 workers who renovated McMurray Middle School came to Workers’ Dignity with claims of $43,000 in unpaid wages. In the year-and-a-half since, they have led a public pressure campaign that has exposed how opaque construction contracting chains lead to worker abuse, and why we are fighting for high-road standards that start at the top. “The system is very corrupt,” described Armando, one of the campaign’s leaders during an MNPS School Board meeting. “It seems broken. Is your
only standard that the contract is the cheapest one?" Through months of coalition building, negotiations, public comments, petitions, demonstrations and other direct actions, construction workers moved the MNPS School Board to hold the Orion Building Corporation accountable for the unscrupulous subcontractor it hired. Last year, under tremendous community pressure, the MNPS School Board moved to:

- Change the MNPS procurement language to mandate general contractors publicly list subcontractors on their projects
- Stop Orion from bidding on multiple projects
- Commit to reviewing procurement language to help ensure construction and renovation projects are carried out with dignity.

This campaign shows what we can win when we stand together. These policy changes open the door for high-road general contractors to bid on projects, which improve working conditions for all workers. These victories only happened because Armando and his team kept the pressure on and demanded action.

Elondra, Daughter of a construction worker
Commercial Construction Campaign - Contd.

Compensation and Care for Injured Workers

Gustavo’s death and the pandemic catalyzed the creation of our Health & Safety Committee. In addition to trainings on how to report COVID violations, we hired another intern to help develop a first of its kind workers’ compensation education and organizing program. Partnering with Vanderbilt Law School, we offer clinics for workers who are injured on the job to meet with legal advocates. Paired with weekly peer-to-peer education and workshops, workers are learning to navigate the anti-worker system and win replacement wages, healthcare, and surgeries.

Women and Non-Binary Worker Committee

About 15% of Nashville construction workers are women or non-binary workers. In summer 2020 we launched the Women of Construction group to provide a space for additional leadership development to address patriarchy, sexism and gender equity in the workplace. The group won improved safety protocols at the 5th and Broadway construction site — one of the city’s largest — by drawing attention to the hazardous and unsanitary conditions in the bathroom facilities and lack of adequate safety measures in face of repeated COVID outbreaks.
Music City Riders United

For years we’ve been asking why Black, Brown, and working class communities are ignored when it comes to public transit and neighborhood infrastructure. Why are our neighborhoods always the ones to suffer from budget cuts or denied what we need for health and safety?

In January, we partnered with Walk Bike Nashville for the Annual Pedestrian Memorial event — condemning the lack of action that contributed to 32 pedestrians killed on Nashville streets the previous year simply for trying to move around the city.

We honored Transit Equity Day and Rosa Parks’ birthday by launching a petition to fully fund WeGo public transit and held a series of workshops about how the city budget is determined. Between January and March 2020, we engaged nearly 400 bus riders through conversations, membership meetings, trainings, and outreach about the budget process.
Co-founding the Nashville People’s Budget Coalition

After being told for years there’s “no money” for public transit or equitable neighborhood infrastructure, we knew we needed additional strategies to build power and influence. For months, several organizations met to discuss what it would take for Nashville to divest from cops and cages and invest in BIPOC and working-class neighborhoods.

Just as the summer of uprisings for Black lives began, we helped launch the Nashville People’s Budget Coalition, alongside Black Lives Matter Nashville, Free Hearts, Gideon’s Army, No Exceptions Prison Collective, the People’s Alliance for Transit, Housing, and Employment, and Southerners on New Ground Nashville. Through our collective efforts during the Metro Nashville budget cycle we:

• Mobilized hundreds of Nashvillians to force a 12-hour public hearing on the city budget, demanding the city defund the police and jails and provide resources for public transit, affordable housing, fully funded public schools, violence interruption, social services and more.
• Collected more than 5000 surveys from Nashvillians about what they want in the budget.
• Hosted Defend Black Lives Block Parties to provide space for collective joy and community building.
• Began a series of ongoing People’s Movement Assemblies to build our power through political education and relationship building across organizations, neighborhoods, and other lines that are often used to divide us.
• Moved Sheriff Hall to finally cut the city jail’s contract with private prison profiteers CoreCivic, a long-time community demand.
We know we need more investment in our neighborhoods, and we know the only way we will get that is through organized communities and clear demands of our city government. Our newest program area engages Nashvillians in building structures for participatory democracy. This means that people are directly involved in developing and implementing policies and programs to transform their living conditions.

This work will take place by bringing our people together through the Black Nashville Assemblies, worker assemblies, tenant assemblies, youth assemblies and other structures to develop a bold political agenda responsive to what our communities need. This work will continue in partnership with the People’s Budget Coalition and the many organizations that launched the Black Nashville Assembly in Fall 2020.

Thank you to our national partners with the Participatory Budgeting Project - Democracy Beyond Elections for your assistance in strategy development, training and technical assistance.
Training & Wage Theft Recovery

Since our founding 10 years ago, Workers’ Dignity has served as a hub where workers can band together to recover stolen wages and demand companies take responsibility for everyone under their roofs and on their worksites. Workers who experience wage theft commit to a process driven by peer education and training, collective public action, and solidarity.

Throughout the year, we held weekly skill-building workshops, which have included:

- Power mapping the construction industry, individual workplaces, and our broader communities
- Right to organize
- Leadership identification, recruitment and development
- Organizing conversations & semantics
- Effective outreach
- Structure tests
- Planning online events
- Meeting facilitation
- How ideas become laws (and the limits of the law)
- Computer skills
- Construction English
- Immigration rights

In 2020, workers won back over $60,000 in wages. By committing to the wage theft recovery process and attending the workshops, workers walk away not only with their money, but the skills and relationships to begin taking on larger worksite or industry fights that address the root causes of exploitation.

Fidel, Rolando, and Nelson won $17,648 for 344 hours of painting work on the luxury Trinity Heights condos in a gentrifying neighborhood of East Nashville. It took 7 months of delegations, letters, and wake up call actions, but they didn’t give up. “When you are in this kind of struggle, there comes a time when you are not just fighting for money, but for dignity,” said Fidel. Wage theft fights are about asserting our most basic labor right—pay for work completed—but also about building the confidence and skills to take on larger systems that dehumanize and oppress us. Leadership development and training is at the core of what we do. Fidel is clear: “My message to other workers is to not give up. Keep fighting, and let’s fight together.”
People Powered Radio Dignidad / Dignity Radio

Tune into 104.1 FM WDTO to listen to Nashville’s only worker-powered radio station! Working-class DJs share information about our campaigns and other movement work, host radio shows, interview local and national freedom fighters, and broadcast music from around the world.

WDTO amplifies our voice to reach thousands, bolstering our own analysis of what’s happening in our city and giving us a platform for cultural exchange and organizing. During the pandemic and uprisings, DJs interviewed community members on topics spanning the struggle for equitable digital education, disaster capitalism, mutual aid in our communities, meat workers fighting for justice, rights to housing during a pandemic and more. We interviewed Black freedom fighters in Minneapolis, the Puerto Rican teachers’ union president, Amazon warehouse workers in Chicago who led the fight to win PTO for thousands of part-time employees, leaders of Western Sahara’s fight for independence, peasant leaders in Guatemala, and many others. We streamed live concerts with local artists and DJs to cut across the physical distances that separates us.

Have an idea for a show? New DJs are always welcome!

* Indicates Link.

- *Amazon Workers Organizing in the Pandemic*
- *Fighting for Reproductive Justice in the South*
- *Freedom for Western Sahara*
- *The Struggle for Black Lives, Movements to Defund the Police, and State Repression*
- *How Covid-19 amplifies how housing is a human right and a risk*
- *¿Qué Soy? Conversaciones acerca del Census, existimos o borrados*
Worker Solidarity Fund

We incorporated direct mutual aid into our work this year because we know workers can’t focus on building strong campaigns if we are too worried about how to pay the bills and feed our families. Thanks to generous grassroots donors and our partners at Jobs with Justice and the National Domestic Workers’ Alliance, we distributed over $100,000 to nearly 200 construction, domestic, and other frontline workers. Direct cash assistance went to members who lost work or incurred medical expenses after contracting COVID-19.

In addition, we distributed more than 7,000 masks and other personal protective equipment in the early months of PPE scarcity, in partnership with 4 Nashville Metro Council members, in neighborhoods hardest hit by the pandemic.

COVID-19 at Work: “The boss is doing nothing”

Alexandra and Daysi are two leaders in the Women of Construction group. They met at the high-end 5th and Broadway downtown construction site. Alexandra, a painter, met Daysi, a ceramic worker, over their shared concerns about the unsanitary bathroom conditions and what they felt was the general contractor, Skanksa’s, neglect for worker safety during the pandemic. The women began organizing their coworkers but Daysi became sick with COVID-19, to the point of a weeks-long hospitalization. A mother of 3 and unable to work for more than 2 months, the threats of eviction were constant. Daysi used support from our Solidarity Fund to ensure some stability for her family. “The boss should support workers in good situations and bad situations,” she said. “We’re doing everything we can for the job. When we are ill, the boss does nothing to help us survive.” This is why we organized the Solidarity Fund — because workers are the ones who will care for each other when a crisis hits.

All steps in the selection and distribution of funds were managed and oversaw by the Workers’ Dignity Steering Committee.
Looking to 2021

With 2020 behind us, more people than ever are aware of the injustices in our communities. And more people than ever are joining the organizing that is rising up to build a new world based on community care, strength, and freedom. Momentum is on our side. We will continue building power through our existing campaigns, and are excited to anchor a new Youth Organizing School to launch this summer.

Workers’ Dignity Youth Organizing Fellowship

In January 2021 we welcomed 13 young people, ages 14-19, into the inaugural cohort of the Workers’ Dignity Youth Fellowship. This summer we will launch a Youth Organizing School, and the Fellows are working to shape the curriculum, recruit their peers, and facilitate youth assemblies. In partnership with Free Hearts, Gideon’s Army, Movements Including X, Safer Schools Nashville, and Southerners on New Ground Nashville, Fellows receive intensive training and mentorship from Nashville’s experienced movement leaders.
Fundraising & Finances

All this work and more was made possible by the solidarity expressed through grassroots fundraising. We are overwhelmed by a growth of more than 50% in grassroots fundraising last year. Donors rallied to raise $15,000 for the Solidarity Fund, $42,561 to celebrate our 10th Anniversary, and $56,041 in our Year-End Drive, in addition to our bedrock of monthly donors.

Our success comes from relational fundraising — asking fellow workers, friends, neighbors and family members to pitch in what you can because we believe in what we are building together. Thank you to the 701 individuals, unions and community partners who donated in 2020. We couldn’t do this work without such deep community support. In addition to grassroots fundraising, we received support from 23 private foundations in 2020.

Become a monthly donor at www.workersdignity.org!

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Our Team

Steering Committee (Board) Members

- Armando Alameda
- Adriana Alvarez
- Jamel Campbell-Gooch
- Alyssa Chvasta
- Angelica Deaton
- Vanessa Diaz
- Lesvy Macías
- Raúl Méndez
- Theeda Murphy
- A Randolph
- Andrew Reckard
- Celestino Rivera
- Rachel Ternes
- Santiago Tomás
- Jorge Salles Diaz
- Rondriquez White
- Molly Williams

* non-voting ally member

Staff

- Ashley Bachelder
- Diana López
- Erica Perry
- Neptali Pérez
- Cecilia Prado
- Jack Willey

AmeriCorps Service Member

- Rachel Flores

Interns

- Katherine Diaz Garcia
- Vanessa Diaz
- Leslie Marroquin
- Raúl Méndez

Graphic Designer

- Sandy Rao