

Historic IAM organizing campaign in North Carolina

Democracy for Reynolds Tobacco Workers



Rev. John Mendez and IAM Southern Territory Organizer Bobby Sapp helped workers at Reynolds Tobacco in Winston-Salem, NC.

short in a state where organizing success has been elusive.

“At Reynolds, the workers who stood up for themselves had a chance to exercise their legal right to choose a union,” said International President Tom Buffenbarger. “The day is coming when we will welcome these brave men and women into the Machinists Union.”

Today’s workers at Reynolds are also writing the latest chapter in a labor saga at the tobacco company that goes back more than a half century. From 1943 to 1951, the then largely African-American workforce at Reynolds organized a union and gained national recognition with an orderly strike over working conditions in 1947.

The 38-day strike also served as a defining moment for the budding civil rights movement in North Carolina, bringing labor, church and community activists together for the first time.

“The unique history of unions at Reynolds played a

The experts said it couldn’t be done. Organizing drives face more resistance in Southern states than anywhere else in the nation. And North Carolina in particular is known for its fierce opposition to unions and union organizers, openly boasting of its status as the state with the fewest union members.

And the experts were right, at least for now. But more important, 1,800 workers at Reynolds Tobacco in Winston-Salem, NC got a

chance to vote.

The IAM’s organizing campaign marks an important achievement at the country’s second-largest tobacco company, where production and maintenance workers voted in March on IAM representation.

A shift of just several hundred votes would have made all the difference. The IAM campaign demonstrated how a combination of shop floor leadership, community involvement and high-tech support can still come up

surprising role in the support we found there," said IAM Southern Territory Lead Organizer Bobby Sapp. "For many of the workers, it was a matter of finishing the job their parents and grandparents started more than 50-years ago."

Key issues for Reynolds' workers in the latest drive included the steady erosion of employee benefits and unilateral changes to long-established work rules.

"Reynolds claimed they were facing an intense competitive environment, but failed to justify the large salaries, bonuses and stock for senior executives," said Sapp. "The vote was a referendum on the status quo at Reynolds and, for now, the status quo won."

Throughout the campaign, IAM organizers used every opportunity to emphasize the positive impact union representation could bring for workers, the community and the company. A freewheeling and frequently irreverent IAM website provided Reynolds workers with regular updates on the progress of their campaign and served to quickly debunk misinformation circulated by a union avoidance firm hired by Reynolds to thwart the drive.

Mass meetings and community involvement kept momentum going and spirits

A peaceful 1947 strike over working conditions at Reynolds Tobacco in Winston-Salem brought labor, community and church activists together and helped spark the civil rights movement that followed.

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Tom Buffenbarger
International President

high throughout the four-month campaign. But it was the high percentage of computer-savvy employees at Reynolds that made the Internet such a key ingredient in the campaign.

"It's hard to imagine an organizing campaign for a group this large without utilizing the Internet," said Southern Territory GVP Bob Martinez. "I'm confident the lessons

learned at Reynolds can be applied to other locations here in the South and around the country."

Workers pay a high price for the relative absence of labor unions in Southern states. Despite the migration of manufacturing jobs from the industrial Northeast and Midwest, workers in Southern states regularly earn less and enjoy fewer benefits than their unionized counterparts.

"The time is coming when workers in the South will demand their rights despite all the efforts by anti-union forces to deny them," said IAM Headquarters General Vice President Bob Thayer. "The workers at Reynolds have a proud history of leading by example. Their commitment and determination will serve to guide a new generation of union members and union organizers."

