



MOBTOWN BEAT

United Workers harness protest energies with their Fair Development Conference

Baltimore-based coalition of low-wage workers has been campaigning on behalf of workers at the Inner Harbor

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PUBLISHED: OCTOBER 26, 2011

From February's labor protests in Wisconsin to the 99 percenters currently camping out in New York's Zuccotti Park, populist protest is suddenly all the rage. But movements for social change are nothing new. Take, for example, the United Workers, a Baltimore-based coalition of low-wage workers formed in 2002. In 2007, the United Workers lobbied for "living wages" at Camden Yards—and got them. Since then, the group has been campaigning on behalf of workers at the Inner Harbor, trying to institutionalize rights to health care and education.

To raise awareness of these efforts, the group has a history of putting on political events that go beyond the strictly political. In the past, that has resulted in street-side theatrical performances, a community fair, and, in true activist tradition, plenty of marches. This weekend, Oct. 28-30, UW hosts the Fair Development Conference, a gathering of grassroots organizations, political activists, community organizers, and other interested parties from as far as Brazil and as near as Baltimore.

As UW members see it, according to Leadership Coordinator Ashley Hufnagel, the Inner Harbor workers' endeavors are intertwined with similar struggles happening worldwide—so why not open up the discussion? The goal is to create an international dialogue around questions the United Workers deem essential: How do we develop our communities and economies in ways that support human rights, instead of corporate profits? And what might fair development look like, in Baltimore and across the world?

For leftist activists, "development" can be a dirty word, with its connotations of exploitation and profiteering. But underlying the Fair Development Conference is the belief that it doesn't have to be that way. "We believe in development," Hufnagel says. "Clearly [Baltimore] is struggling with an immense amount of poverty, and clearly something needs to happen. But it has to be done in a way that benefits everyone, not just private developers and partnerships."

The issue is especially relevant to UW as the group continues its campaign for a fairly developed Inner Harbor, a place that embodies the promises and failures of development in Baltimore. "The Inner Harbor should be this wonderful place where there's food, family, community—that's something we should celebrate," Hufnagel says. Instead, she points out that many Inner Harbor workers don't get paid a living wage, while last summer Power Plant Live developer the Cordish Cos. asked the city for a \$3 million rent break.

The workshops, lectures, and presentations planned for the conference will take on much more than just the struggle for the soul of the harbor. And although fair development is the organizing principle behind the conference, the topic is interpreted broadly enough to include discussions on universal health care,

permaculture design, and lessons drawn from the 19th-century movement to abolish slavery. One workshop will explore Johns Hopkins Hospital's fraught relationship with the Middle East neighborhood, where it displaced hundreds of residents to build a controversial—and moribund—biotech park; another will spotlight worker-led organizations that have successfully lobbied for Taco Bell, Whole Foods, and other food-industry giants to raise wages for the people who pick their tomatoes.

Most of these will take place at 2640 Space on Saturday, Oct. 29, a day dedicated to workshops, panels, and discussions, followed by a film screening and dance party; Friday evening will be for keynote speakers and a banquet dinner; and Sunday will feature an action event where participants in zombie costumes will gather downtown in a protest/costume party that will tell the “terrifying tale of poverty zone development,” according to Hufnagel. Some of the local groups participating in the conference include the Baltimore Algebra Project, the Baltimore Jewish Voice for Peace, the Civilian Soldier Alliance, **the Community Law Center**, and the local chapter of the NAACP. (See the conference's web site, unitedworkers.org/fair-development/conf, for more information and a full schedule.)

Marian Kramer, one of Friday night's keynote speakers, is a 40-year veteran of the social justice movement. When a reporter reaches her by phone at the Detroit office of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, she's busy helping mobilize the nascent Occupy Michigan protests. As she sees it, there are plenty of similarities between Detroit's struggles and the situation in Baltimore: “People are starving [in Baltimore] too, just like here. Losing their houses to foreclosure, losing jobs. [They] don't even see a future.”

And, in a fortuitous bit of timing, the conference seems perfectly (albeit accidentally) situated to take advantage of the energy surrounding the Occupy protests. “What's really interesting about the Occupy movements is the general frustration,” Hufnagel says. “There's not just one issue—it's all interconnected, and that can be really overwhelming.” To that end, the conference hopes to offer both veteran and newly minted activists a way to see the scale and scope of progressive social movements in this country, as well as opportunities to get involved locally, nationally, or globally. UW representatives have stopped by Occupy Baltimore's McKeldin Square to offer support, and to give presentations on the history of the protest's harborside location. “Some harbor workers have been there pretty much every day and slept out,” Hufnagel says.

But according to Hufnagel, what's really important for the future of the social justice movement is figuring out how to build power over the long haul. “When we look at the [1960s] and at all these other social movements, there were moments when years of social organizing and connections came together,” she says, offering as an example the sit-ins organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee that helped spur the civil rights movement. Of course, grassroots movements face the dangers of becoming disorganized, co-opted, or just slowed down; that's why “it's important that we have a way of developing people's analysis, their community organizing skills so they can respond to these challenges,” Hufnagel says—and she hopes that the conference she's helping organize is a further step in that direction.

Kramer, who's seen quite a bit of political action in her time, remains hopeful about today's grassroots activists—both those planning to attend UW's Fair Development Conference and the Occupy protesters nationwide. “The future belongs to them,” she says. “And it's there for the taking.”