

'What's the Matter with Kentucky?' Workers, Race, and Kentucky in Crisis

Janet Tucker, activist with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, and member of the National Executive Committee, CCDS

I am happy to be here at this conference. I grew up here in Pennsylvania about 50 miles north of here and I went to nursing school right here on this campus. And this is where my political awakening took place.

I was in high school in the early 60's. Being inspired by the civil rights movement some of us young people from my small rural community church joined with a youth group with a black church in town. At the end of our year of working together we went to church with them one Sunday and then they came to our church for the same. Except a group of men tried to organize others to meet us in the parking lot with shotguns to keep our black friends out of our church. They backed down but the man organizing this was our high school's 'Problems of Democracy' teacher. There I learned there was indeed a problem with democracy.

Coming to Pittsburgh I learned more than nursing. I joined a church in the Hill district here whose minister an Asian American had been kicked out of a friends church in Ohio for going down south and marching for civil rights. In that church I joined a group called "the skeptics". I worked and studied w for the 3 years that I was here. We studied MLK and Stokely Carmichael and we agonized over the assassination of MLK. From my friends in that group I learned a lot about white supremacy.

Little did I know that 40 years later it would still be the elephant in the room.

But for the past 20 years I have lived in KY. Among other organizations I work with Kentuckians For The Commonwealth (KFTC), a grassroots statewide social justice organization. We have

a very active voter empowerment project and worked very hard in this election on voter registration, education and mobilization.

On this last election eve I sat with friends in a local restaurant watching election results. It was disheartening to see KY one of the first states called and for McCain no less. But that does not tell the whole story of KY. So what is the matter with KY?.

Kentucky is and always has been one of the poorest states in the nation. Kentucky is 48th in income level having 29 of the 100 poorest counties in the nation. This has only intensified with the present economic crisis that is devastating our nation. One columnist in the Lexington Herald Leader stated that whatever the national unemployment rate is we can roughly add 2 percentage points for the state of KY.

Big Coal has largely been responsible for this devastating poverty in Kentucky as it has been through Appalachia. Today Harlan County is the 2nd highest coal producing county in KY. 26% of the people in Harlan live below the poverty line. Hal Rogers is the congressional representative for the 5th congressional district—a largely coal producing area, is the second from the lowest congressional district, out of 435 districts in income and education.

Kentuckians are a wonderful and proud people. There is a rich history of class struggle and trade unionism in Kentucky and in the mountains. There is a lot of pride associated with being a coal miner. From the organizing of the communist led National Miners Union to the organization of the UMW, there is a rich history of organizing in Kentucky.

Who saw the film *Harlan County, USA* ? Really incredible film. If you haven't seen it. See it! It depicts the 1970's when more than 180 miners went out on strike to protest unsafe working conditions and an inclusion of a no strike clause in their contract.

Harlan county became known as "Blood Harlan" coming from The miner wars of the 1930's which left many dead and wounded.

Did you know that --The UMW was the first integrated labor union dating back to 1899? It was in the constitution that a miner could not be a member of the UMW and the KKK.

It is because of primarily the UMW that Kentucky is not a right to work state. But that organization is now gone! With absence of unions in EKY The working class in the mountains have lost their most basic organization.

At it's high point in the 1940's Eastern KY were union mines . The UMW built hospitals with health care provided to miners and their families with no co-pay, choice of doctors etc.

This is startling if you think about that there are no union mines in Eastern KY today and only a handful in Western KY. 1/3 of the people of KY were with out health insurance.

The mine owners have always viciously attacked any and attempts of miners to organize. There have been many killed, wounded and jailed. There are still people in jail today from the attempt to organize Maffey. Union mines would close and then reopen under another name later, etc. No union, So the struggle continued.

Today we see less underground mining to more surface top mining and mountain top removal. This has not just caused destruction of the beautiful mountains of eastern Ky and environmental destruction but has disrupted whole communities with the destruction of the land and loss of clean water, etc. The deep underground jobs have been replaced with machines. While coal production has increased, jobs have decreased dramatically.

Other areas in KY have also been hit hard also with the economic crisis. Loss of industrial base and loss of union jobs with expanding low wage service jobs. Unions have not aggressively been organizing in the state.

Unions largely have not dealt well with community issues. One African American community activist pointed out that she grew up in a union household but never knew that until she was an adult. "Unions were workplace only and not involved in the community and community issues like quality education". 3 unions have left KY JWJ over issues of racism—again that elephant in the room.

There has been a large influx of immigrant labor in Kentucky. With the absence of labor organizing, immigrant workers are setting up their own labor centers. The Kentucky Coalition for Refugee and Immigrant rights has been holding a series of community meetings which have been very well attended. People are eager for organizations.

But back to the elections--How people voted in KY is complicated and there are many facets to look at. What is not so different is voting patterns. What is different is the demographics. But I think the lessons that it holds for all of us is not that different. We need to work with white workers.

Nationwide: older, rural and small town, white, Protestant voters voted for McCain. These demographic groups describe the vast majority of voters in Kentucky, especially in eastern Kentucky.

But that said, overall, although we are a red state we were less red in this election than 2004. The state became more blue in 2008. But there is another disturbing finding. Over all while most KY counties were "less red", eastern KY, and the coalfields in particular, are a clear exception to this trend.

For years, coal miners would take canaries into the mines to warn of dangerous gases. When the canaries died, the miners knew it was time to get out of the mine. This our canary in the mines. This holds lessons for all of us about the importance of working class organizations and the work we must do among the white working class.

It is vital right now that we build working class organizations, organizations based on class struggle and the unity of race and class and in doing so we fight white supremacy every step of the way

Without this organization there is fertile ground that we see for the kind of right wing populism that you saw in the election and are seeing now.

Just think about Richard Trumka's, who came from the UMW, speech on Obama and race, and think about the difference that may have made if there were strong trade unions in the mountains--in this area with such strong union history. In this area in which Jessie Jackson had broad support but in this election were ignored by the Democratic Party.

On my last point, let me tell you a little about KFTC. As one person put it to me recently—"it is about empowering people to believe in themselves" But really KFTC is about our members all 6000 of them so let me introduce you to just a few of them.

Meet Teri is one of our leaders. Teri is in a long tradition of mountain woman who have fought for justice from the woman in the Brookside miners strike to the Widow Combs to Evelyn Williams. She is a grandmother, a daughter of a miner who died of black lung. She also had a brother who died as a result of a mine accident. Teri an outstanding spokesperson against MTR and an organizer. She regularly leads what we call "mountain witness tours" where people can go and see for themselves this destructive practice and talk to community residents and hear their stories first hand.

Next I'd like to introduce Carl, now retired, was a 3rd generation miner, badly injured in a mining accident went to work for the UMW. He has a son who is a 4th generation miner. He has a son in law who recently lost his job in the mines due to a bad back, He tell of the emotional trauma this young 30 something man has gone through not only from being now unemployed with 3 small children but in his career has pulled 6 dead miners out of the mines. Carl is an

outspoken critic of MTR. He is also working in his county to build a windmill collective enterprise.

Then there is my good friend Tayna, we met during our voter empowerment work. Tayna is a former felon. Kentucky is one of only 2 states in the nation that takes voting rights away for life for anyone convicted of a felony. Voting rights can only be restored by a pardon by the governor. She had her rights restored under one governor just to have them revoked again under another. Tayna is a tireless spokesperson for our Restoration of Voting Rights Campaign. She talks about how important it is to vote and to be involved in ones community. She speaks of pride of accompanying her 26year old son to the poles this year to vote for the first time.

Meet Dana, a young mother in one of our urban areas. Dana grew up in a low income working class family one of 6 children. She is a leader in our economic justice and tax reform work. She has worked hard in her area to build a KFTC chapter and to organize people around fair low income house and tenants rights.

And meet Rully a young father from the coalfields fighting to save his family land from the devastation odmountain top removal. Rully has a very clear idea of what priorities should be considered when crafting the future of world energy policy and was part of a delegation that spoke at the UN. He also went on a trip with other KFTC members to Columbia last year and met with miners in Columbia. He came back from this trip with a personal sense of internationalism. Rully states "The number one reason I do this is for this little girl."

Those are just a few of our 6000 members. The great thing about KFTC is linking all the different issues. We all learn so much from each other and in that we learn that we have so much in common and we learn to fight and work together around all our issues.

Do you know what a "Holler" To quote Teri "same story different holler"