

Work in Progress

Rapid Response Conference Celebrates Success, Pushes for More Progress

It would have been easy for the group from North Carolina to stay home and leave the lobbying to someone else, to push aside the hours of studying legislative policy at the USW Rapid Response conference and instead look for new jobs.

But here they were in Washington, D.C., members of USW locals 1025 and 850 in Charlotte, walking the halls of the U.S. Capitol, armed with manila folders filled with questions about national health care, international trade and workers' rights and carrying their personal stories to members of Congress.

There was no way Joe Smith, Christine McGuire, Jerry Bullard, Ginnie Watson and Pamela Foxx would miss the conference, especially not the day of lobbying legislators about issues critical to unions and other American workers. They are all long-time Continental Tire AG employees who have been laid off and stripped of health insurance and retiree benefits.

The Conti contingent was among more than 700 of the USW's most active members who gathered in the nation's capitol for the four-day conference. They heard from a variety of speakers and attended workshops on key issues such as the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), universal health care; scaling back unfair trade and anti-sweatshop legislation.



"If we don't do something now, there's really no one to blame but us," Local 850's Jerry Bullard said moments before meeting with Rep. Brad Miller, a North Carolina Democrat. "Now is the time to gain back what we've lost."

Looking ahead to 2008

International President Leo W. Gerard and Secretary-Treasurer Jim English said the 2006 elections were proof that union's Rapid Response program works. The new U.S. House promptly passed a raise to the minimum wage and okayed EFCA, which is pending in the Senate.

Rapid Response educates members who get others involved in advocating workers' issues or helping lead actions to impact Steelworker issues on Capitol Hill or State Houses, often at a moment's notice. There are campaigns to write personal notes to legislators, hometown meetings with congresspersons, email campaigns, phone drives, lunch break meetings and other grass-roots efforts.

Rapid Response issues typically affect a worker's wallet or family budget and include trade, health care coverage, overtime pay and loss of jobs or unemployment.

Gerard encouraged members to keep pushing lawmakers from both political parties to work on issues vital to the union. It's not too early to start preparing for the 2008 presidential election.

"What happens if we don't fight for what's right? What happens to us if we know what the right thing to do is and we don't do it?" Gerard asked. "What we do from today until November of '08 will determine the kind of future we leave for our kids and grandkids."

Making a difference

After three days of intense workshops, Christine McGuire and other members from Local 1025 were ready to talk to lawmakers face to face about health care, job creation and other concerns.

"Definitely this is a way to make a difference," McGuire said as she waited for an appointment at the Capitol. "I represent a lot of people back home and I have a responsibility to them."

Bob Parker, a member of Local 979 in Cleveland, feels the same kind of responsibility. He spends several hours a night after work at Mittal Steel scouring the Internet, phoning lawmakers and voters and attending meetings to help educate and empower his co-workers.

"One guy at the plant, I talked to 25 times about calling his senators and encouraging them to vote for the Employee Free Choice Act," Parker recalled before heading to a meeting with Ohio Congresswoman Stephanie Tubbs Jones, a Democrat. "He finally called."

As more than a dozen USW members crowded into Jones' office for a teleconference, Parker was just as tenacious in talking about the union's desire to see an end to so-called Fast Track trade

approval. Fast Track gives the president authority to push through international trade deals without Congressional approval.

"These trade deals that are currently in front of us, we don't really want to compromise. We don't want any president to have Fast Track authority," Parker said.

Trade unionists in Colombia are being assassinated at a record pace as the Administration pushes for a trade agreement with that country and Parker said that's an example of why Fast Track is a bad idea.

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Christine McGuire

"We don't like Fast Track," Local 979 member Jim Ciomek piped up, reminding Jones that as a member of the money-wielding Ways and Means Committee she had the power to influence the debate.

"I'm opposed to Fast Track," Jones said as Steelworkers scribbled notes for member reports detailing their visits. "This is an easy one to say no to. There is no reason to negotiate."

Ciomek made the same argument when he and Parker visited Ohio Rep. Steve LaTourette, a Republican who promised the pair that he was against Fast Track.

"But will you vote against it?" Ciomek pressed.

"You can't vote for something if you're against it," LaTourette said.

