

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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Where Are We Headed?

As the grocery store cashier rang up the last few items from the shopping cart, the customer ahead of me kept asking the worker to subtotal the sale. Resignedly, the shopper handed back the last item scanned—a box of scalloped potatoes. “I’m not going to be able to get this,” he mumbled. It was one dollar—a dollar more than he had to spend on food for the family. “I’ll get it,” I said, quietly. He said he’d been unemployed for a long time. I’ve been there.

I hadn’t seen Amy for almost 2 decades and I was stunned to learn that her mother, a woman with whom I’d worked, had died of cancer 17 years ago at the age of 42. I had worked with Amy’s aunt also; she was buried just three weeks ago. She died of cancer too. As I shared words of comfort, I encouraged Amy to maintain her own cancer screening and physical exams. Amy sighed, “I lost my job and I don’t have health insurance. I can’t afford to go to a doctor.” I shook my head. I’ve been there too.

These are just two stories among the many North Carolina residents who feel like their state is headed in the wrong direction. When the legislature voted to commence reforms to the state’s unemployment benefit system, 70,000 unemployed North Carolinians lost their federal unemployment benefits on July 1, 2013. An additional 100,000 are in line to lose theirs by the end of the year. North Carolina is the only state to cut off access to the federal Emergency Unemployment Compensation (EUC), a program that gives unemployed citizens money after they use up their state benefits.

For months, thousands of people – including UCC members and clergy - have rallied together in protest to the state’s lawmaking that many North Carolinians say are adversely affecting the poor and working middle class. This series of rallies, dubbed “Moral Mondays,” are composed of intercultural, multiracial crowds demonstrating discontent with the recent decisions of the legislature. For example, one vote discontinued programs such as the earned income-tax credit for the poor, while at the same time, the legislature approved tax cuts that overwhelmingly benefit corporations and millionaires.

Other actions that seem to indicate backwards movement for North Carolina include actions to cut public funding for education, phase out teacher tenure, and remove incentives for teachers obtaining graduate degrees. The state has also voted to restrict women’s reproductive rights. One bill alleged to “restore confidence in North Carolina” changed the state’s voting procedures in ways that are reminiscent of voter suppression: strict requirements regarding state-issued photo IDs, limiting early voting and ending same-day registration — steps that disproportionately hamper black voters in elections. The bill even ends the 1925 enacted “straight-ticket voting,” the practice of voting for every candidate of a single party.

Rev. William Barber, president of the North Carolina chapter of the NAACP and a key leader of the Moral Mondays rallies, has announced plans to hold rallies on August 28, 2013 in each of North Carolina’s 13 Congressional Districts. Scheduled on the date of the 50th Anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington, the events will shine light on the policies of the North Carolina General Assembly and the influence their decisions have had on North Carolina’s local communities. Where *are* we headed? According to Rev. Barber, “We will lift our voices and say ‘Forward Together, Not One Step Back!’” For more information about Moral Mondays, see <http://www.naacpn.org/>

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