**Headline:** How Workers Are Revolutionizing the South

By David McCall

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**[Article Body:]**

Donneta Williams, president of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 1025 and a longtime optical fiber maker at the Corning plant in Wilmington, North Carolina, knows how important it is for workers intent on forming a union to speak directly with peers who walk in the same shoes.

So Williams agreed to send three of her colleagues to Corning’s Tarboro facility, about 145 miles away, when workers at that site approached the union with questions about organizing.

Local 1025 members shared firsthand accounts of how the union boosted their wages, gave them a voice, and kept them safe on the job. And in May 2024, the workers at Tarboro filed for an election to join the USW.

They’re among a [growing number of workers across the South](https://inthesetimes.com/article/durham-north-carolina-south-union-labor-strike) eager to leverage the power of solidarity and build brighter futures, even as CEOs and Republicans in this part of the country still conspire to hold them down.

“It’s all about making life better,” said Williams, who also [serves as a vice president](https://aflcionc.org/who-we-are/vice-presidents) of the North Carolina AFL-CIO, noting that workers are organizing across numerous industries in a string of Southern states with traditionally low numbers of union members.

“The narrative on unions in the South needs to change,” she added, pointing out that growing numbers of workers are grasping the benefits of collective action and demanding their fair share in the [booming](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/12/08/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-the-november-jobs-report/) post-pandemic economy.

“We’re here,” she said. “We’re strong. We’re standing up, and we’re fighting with all that we have.”

About [1,400 workers at the Blue Bird electric bus factory](https://apnews.com/article/blue-bird-school-bus-georgia-union-steelworkers-f95e660aabb27abba9b6bd2606fbfc8e) in Fort Valley, Georgia, in 2023 voted overwhelmingly to organize through the USW.

The vote was a breakthrough for workers on the front lines of a vital, growing industry. It also sent a pointed, defiant message to a [Republican governor](https://www.ajc.com/politics/kemp-signs-bill-discouraging-unionization-in-georgia/DLGNJFVCAJGYBAFGHFM7KU6TOM/#:~:text=Gov.%20Brian%20Kemp%20on%20Monday,such%20as%20new%20automotive%20plants.) who lies about unions and tries to prevent Georgians from joining them.

On the heels of that monumental victory, autoworkers at a Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, overcame Republican opposition and [voted by a huge majority](https://apnews.com/article/uaw-union-election-vw-chattanooga-tennessee-alabama-74ac19f72cd334050df96ffdccf7425f) to unionize.

Their counterparts at a [Hyundai plant](https://alabamareflector.com/2024/05/14/at-montgomery-rally-hyundai-workers-describe-difficult-working-conditions/) in Alabama continue their own organizing drive, citing safety issues and irregular scheduling making it virtually impossible to make plans outside of work. Despite the poor conditions that these and other workers face, however, the state’s anti-union governor brags about her [subservience to corporations](https://www.al.com/news/2024/05/alabama-is-not-michigan-ivey-signs-union-bill-as-mercedes-workers-vote-on-joining-uaw.html) and urges workers to vote against their best interests.

Corning, a maker of glass products for broadband, solar power, and many other industries, has seven locations in North Carolina. While only workers at Wilmington enjoy USW membership now, their counterparts at other sites across the state intend to change that.

Williams says workers are educating themselves about collective action, seeing through the right-wing corporate pandering, and then shrugging off the South’s anti-labor traditions to chart a path forward for their families.

“The mindset of workers, in general, has changed,” observed Williams, who credits President Joe Biden’s pro-union agenda and job-creating legislation like the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act with helping to fuel demand for unions.

“We are in full support of everyone who is trying to organize,” she said, noting that North Carolina’s Democratic governor supports unions, unlike his Republican counterparts in other states. “We’re helping any way that we can.”

In one-on-one meetings and on Zoom calls, for example, Local 1025 representatives talk to prospective union members about how they bargain higher wages, quality health care, and retirement security.

Williams said she can sense the workers’ interest growing as she explains how unions empower their members to look out for one another, fight discrimination, and ensure fairness in scheduling. And she emphasizes that workers at every location control their own destiny and build the contract that’s right for them.

“It’s your contract,” she says. “It’s what you want your workplace to look like. Every workplace is different.”

Unions lift up entire communities, a [U.S. Treasury Department report](https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1706) confirmed in 2023.

They raise members’ wages by as much as 15 percent, creating a competitive environment in which non-unionized employers also must increase pay to hold on to workers. Union contracts provide workers with better benefits and retirement security than they’d otherwise earn, and their focus on workplace safety “can pull up whole industries,” the report concluded.

Unions fight favoritism and discrimination, creating more equitable workplaces and communities. The [collective spirit](https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/Labor-Unions-And-The-Middle-Class.pdf) forged inside the organized shop extends beyond the plant gates, with union members not only voting more often than other workers but also volunteering and donating to charity more often.

“You own this. Don’t let the boss own this,” longtime USW activist David Beard tells workers who are considering an organizing drive to take control of their futures, noting unions are families that safeguard members from unfair treatment.

“You’re not protected without a union, especially if you’re a mouthy guy like me,” explained Beard, executive board member for Local 752L, which represents workers at the Goodyear plant in Texarkana, Arkansas.

Companies long located in the South because of generous incentive packages and non-union workforces. Although companies and Republicans desperately want to maintain the status quo, he said, “people are hungry” for better.

During one conference call, Williams stunned workers at a non-union Corning site when she explained the holiday premium pay Local 1025 members receive. She pointed out that those workers can fight for the same pay—and get her help doing it.

“We’re just stronger together, and we are here to support them,” she said.