

## Workers Rally For Freedom in New Haven - New Haven Advocate

Written by Peter Cunningham

Tuesday, April 05, 2011 5:21pm - Last Updated Tuesday, April 05, 2011 2:59pm

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### 'We Will Not Be Divided'



About 3,000 protesters descended on the New Haven Green at College and Elm streets last Wednesday, as weeks of demonstrations and public civil unrest culminated in the “We Are One Rally and March,” lead by the Connecticut Center for a New Economy and Greater New Haven Central Labor Council, and other local community and labor organizations.

Comprised of union and non-union workers, the unemployed, students, members of the spiritual community and more, the crowd spilled out off the Green and onto the steps of the United Methodist Church, blocking traffic on Elm Street, live music filling the gaps between call-and-response chants of “Whose streets? Our streets!” and “We are one,” a refrain carried throughout the event.

The spirit of community and camaraderie was underscored by sheets of free neon stickers for demonstrators to identify their homes in one of New Haven’s neighborhoods and punctuated by the sights and sounds of small children and families talking and laughing with neighbors. The rally at times took on the tenor of a community block party.

Occurring in the wake of smaller events around the city and state, including a student-lead protest of recent teacher layoffs and budget cuts at City Hall last Tuesday, the broad-based coalition was united under a banner of unity and worker solidarity against layoffs and budget cuts in the public and private sectors.

Notably, New Haven-based New Alliance Bank announced 229 layoffs in February as part of a planned takeover by First Niagara Bank of Buffalo, N.Y., with the city laying off 16 police officers later that month. There has been controversy surrounding Mayor John DeStefano’s proposed fiscal year budget that would cause the layoffs of 60 teachers and more than 100 other school staff. The city has also proposed privatizing the schools’ custodial workers if their union does not agree to concessions.

“Anytime anything happens to anyone in our community we’re all affected,” said Tom Maloney, who represented himself and Teamsters Local 1150. “An attack on one union is an attack on all unions.”

Members of the Yale community also came out to show solidarity with the community at large.

“There are big gaps between Yale workers and the city, and this event is important to try to

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close them,” said Gabrielle Omonte, a worker at the Yale University Art Gallery and a member of the Federation of University Employees Local 34. “I feel more a part of New Haven than Yale.”

Michelle Morgan, representing Yale’s unofficial Graduate Employees and Student Organization, echoed Ms. Omonte’s sentiments.

“[Graduate] students see this as a kind of coalition coming together in a lot of places,” she said. “We stand with the people as workers.”

The rally culminated when protesters marched to City Hall, where a series of speakers whipped up the already impassioned crowd.

“We are together as one,” cried the Rev. Scott Marks, pastor of the New Growth Outreach Ministries, who emphasized the event’s themes of unity and solidarity. “There are people who are hungry, there are people in pain, people who work hard every day. There are other people who are going to try to divide us, but this is for the workers, for families and we will not be divided.”



Evoking the civil rights era and the work of Martin Luther King Jr., who marched on behalf of labor unions in Memphis, Claudine Wilkins-Chambers, a 40-year veteran of New Haven public schools, spoke to cheers and applause.

“We cannot honor the dreamer and allow politicians and corporations to trample on his dreams,” she said.

“There is a new spirit in this world, in Wisconsin and Egypt and here,” roared John Wilhelm, president of UNITE HERE, a union.

He led to crowd to fever pitch.

“The days of divide and conquer and over, because finally we are one.”

The crowd quickly dispersed as temperatures dropped after nightfall, but Rhona Cohen was

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among the protesters who lingered.

“I feel inspired,” she said. “I’m ready to do this again and again until the message gets through.”