

Lessons in Solidarity

Grady Hospital Workers United

BY LARRY MILLER

ONE OF THE KEY CHALLENGES of social justice history teaching is to find ways to prompt students to reflect on the importance of people sticking together to make needed changes. Many students experience the unity of being on an athletic team, but that's often as far as their "unity" extends. One of my first jobs was in the laundry of an enormous hospital, Grady, in Atlanta. I wrote a story about my experience with the union at Grady in order to help my students think about unity, organizing for justice, attempts to divide people, and issues of class and racial power.

I also wanted to share with students an event that helps them see the values that animate my teaching. I use this story as part of a unit on the Civil Rights Movement to show that the movement was not just about voting and integration, but also about workers' rights and dignity on the job. Some of the discussion and writing questions that I use with students are in the accompanying box.

When I went to work at Grady Hospital in 1969, its 21 floors towered over downtown



Flip Schulke/CORBIS

Interracial alliances in workplaces like Grady Hospital took inspiration from the Civil Rights Movement, which involved people of different races in actions such as this rally after the 1966 March Against Fear.

Atlanta. With 800 beds, it was the largest hospital in the South.

Just a simple walk down the halls showed me the vestiges of the “Southern way.” All the doctors were white. So were all the managers. Scores of African Americans worked at Grady, but they were emptying bedpans or scrubbing sheets or plates or floors, concentrated in the lowest-paying jobs.

When I was hired into the laundry, my starting pay was the minimum wage of 75 cents an hour. Out of 44 workers, I was the only white person and one of seven men.

Our two bosses, who liked to refer to themselves as “Southern boys,” almost always had a cigarette in hand or a mouth full of chew. We nicknamed them Billy and Bob. They openly used racist language and didn’t hide their disdain for the black employees.

Most of the 37 women working in the laundry had not finished high school and had come to Atlanta from southern Georgia to find employment. A couple of the older women would tell me stories about the old days “back home” while spitting out the snuff they were chewing. Mainly they talked about how hard life was.

Working Conditions

Each day we washed, dried, folded, and carried thousands of pounds of hospital sheets, blankets, operating gowns, operating covers, wash rags, towels, and anything else the hospital used. Often we handled materials that were soiled, bloodied, and stained with urine and feces. From time to time, human flesh—even recognizable body parts—showed up wrapped in cloth.

Each side of the hospital had large chutes for loading soiled cloths. Once laundry was put into the chute, it would drop down to the

basement. My job, along with one other worker, was to unpack the pile of cloths in each of the eight rooms, put the dirty laundry in carts, and roll the carts to a loading dock in one corner of the hospital.

From there we loaded the laundry onto the back of a large truck and drove the truck across the street to the laundry. Our final task was to place the laundry onto a sorting table where women began the sorting process. Carts of laundry were sent to the washers, dryers, and then to the folding tables. Once folded and sorted, workers placed the laundry in carts that were attached to each other and pulled back to the hospital by a small tractor and then delivered to the floors and departments of the hospitals.

It didn’t take long to become aware of the many concerns of my co-workers. The hospital did not provide gloves, breathing protective wear, or even soap to protect workers from contact with all the soiled and bloodied materials we handled. If a department of the hospital had a diseased patient, they would wrap their sheets and gowns in a bundle and identify the package with the word “contaminated.” We handled “contaminated” materials the same way we handled everything else, without any protection or special handling.

Getting Organized

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) represented the workers at Grady. But Georgia is a “right-to-work” state. That doesn’t mean everyone has a right to a job. It means employees are not required to join a union even if their employer recognizes union representation. In the rest of the hospital, fewer than half of the workers were union members. This, of course, made for a weak union. But all the laundry workers had joined the union. We knew we had to stick together.

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I proudly joined the union when asked and quickly became good friends with the union representative in the laundry, James Jackson. I offered my help and support in any way I could to improve conditions and make the union stronger. Soon I was asked to be the assistant representative.

The first thing we did was hold a meeting at a local soul food restaurant to put together a plan. Over plates of oxtails and collard greens, we drew up our demands: safety gloves, breathing protection, aprons and coveralls that would be cleaned daily, antibacterial soap, and special processes for contaminated and diseased laundry. We also wanted the hospital to begin a policy of hiring black managers. Several people volunteered to serve on a committee that would organize our effort.

Three of us, along with a representative from the AFSCME local, met with Billy and Bob and their supervisor. Their response: “We’ll get back with you.”

Weeks went by with no answer, so we held a meeting to discuss our next move. We knew we needed some sort of action to win our demands. We decided not to strike because people feared the hospital would immediately hire new workers to replace us. The union at Grady was too weak.

Instead, we decided to do a “secret slowdown.” This meant we slowed down our work without appearing to work any slower. When observed, everyone would be working like they normally did. But when not under the eyes of Billy and Bob, we moved at a much slower pace. Since there were only two managers, they could never watch all of us at the same time.

For those of us cleaning out the laundry in the chutes, it meant the piles were getting larger and the laundry began to back up the chutes up to the hospital floors. In two days laundry was backed up to the 12th floor. As complaints started coming into the laundry, Billy and Bob went nuts. They were running around trying to figure out what was going on. We played dumb.

They started following those of us responsible for cleaning out the chutes. But all they saw was us hard at work. When they weren’t looking, the chutes kept backing up.

They tried to clean up the piles of laundry themselves, but they couldn’t handle the work. They were getting calls from most of the departments of the hospital. We knew their jobs were on the line.

Scare Tactics

Their next tactic was to begin harassing us individually. They started on a young man named Tyrone who had just moved to Atlanta from southern Georgia. They knew he had a short temper and didn’t take kindly to being insulted and yelled at by the bosses.

On the fourth day of the slowdown, Billy and Bob started to make us work overtime, hoping we’d catch up on the work. Tyrone volunteered to work. That night Billy and Bob followed him everywhere, yelling at him to work faster. When he snapped at them, they fired him on the spot.

The rest of us heard the news the next morning as soon as we got to work. We immediately started planning our next step. James went to the bosses to ask what happened. They said Tyrone was fired for being “insubordinate.”

We knew this was a setup to use Tyrone as an example to the rest of us. They told James to tell us to get to work or we would be fired, too.

James and I talked to the committee. We reminded each other that we had promised to stick together, and if any of us were attacked, we would fight back.

Forty-three of us stood in the middle of the laundry. James told Billy and Bob, “No Tyrone, no work.”

As we stood there for an hour, the bosses kept disappearing. We assumed they were going to ask their manager what they should do.

At one point I went to use the bathroom. As I was walking back, Billy stopped me and said, “What are you doing with them? You’re one of us.” I looked him in the eye and said, “I stand with my brothers and sisters. Give Tyrone his job back.” He ran off mumbling.

I returned to the laundry floor and told everyone what Billy said. “We have to stay

united,” I said. “They’ll try anything to divide us. We can’t let them.”

After standing on the laundry floor for another half hour, Billy and Bob’s manager came rushing into the room saying, “My people, my people. Talk to me.” Everyone saw through him.

James stepped forward. “Our demands were clear weeks ago,” he said. “Now we’ve added a new one. We want Tyrone back to work. If he doesn’t work, no one works.”

The manager asked for a meeting with a few of us. We sent the committee.

James did most of the speaking with the rest of us giving him support. He asked the bosses, “How can we have dignity on this job when we can’t even get soap or gloves to keep our hands sterile? Or aprons to keep the blood and feces off our clothes? And as far as Tyrone is concerned, he is a hard worker but no one wants to have someone riding his back. We feel we can’t go back to work if Tyrone can’t go back to work.”

The manager said he needed a few minutes to discuss the issues with Billy and Bob. As we went back to the floor, we could see the manager frantically making phone calls. After a half hour he asked the committee to come back to the office.

The manager said Tyrone could come back to work the next day. He also said the hospital would

immediately provide plastic gloves and aprons for the haulers and sorters. He then stated that he would meet with us within a week to plan further safety and health issues for the laundry workers.

To implement these concessions, we had to agree to clean up the backed-up laundry even if it meant working overtime and on the weekend. We agreed.

In a very short time we had all of the safety equipment and policies we wanted.

The laundry workers of Grady Hospital knew in our hearts the strength we had found in unity. And I personally realized the power of the black worker and the possibilities for America if white

workers could overcome racism and see who their real friends are. ■

Larry Miller is an editor of *Rethinking Schools* magazine, an elected member of the Milwaukee Public Schools board, and a university adjunct professor. He was a community and union organizer before becoming a classroom teacher in the Milwaukee Public Schools, where he taught for over 18 years.



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Discussion and Writing Questions

1. What reaction do you have to the conditions that workers faced at Grady Hospital?
2. What were the health and safety issues for the laundry workers?
3. Why did the laundry workers rule out going on strike?
4. What might have happened if they would have called for a strike?
5. What tactics did the laundry workers use?
6. What helped workers stick together at Grady?
7. How did the laundry bosses retaliate?
8. How did the bosses try to divide the workers?
9. What role did race and racism play in the events at Grady?
10. How did Billy and Bob's manager respond to the workers? How was it different and how was it similar to Billy and Bob's response to the workers? What accounts for the difference?
11. James uses the word "dignity." What does it mean to him? Why is it important?
12. This story takes place in the South. How does the history of race in the South influence events in the story? Could the events here have taken place in a Northern city? What differences or similarities might there have been?
13. What social classes are depicted in the story? How does social class influence the events described here?
14. In your opinion, what is the significance of the events described in the story?
15. How do you think the events described here affected the white narrator?
16. Do any of the events in the story remind you of anything from your own life?