

America's Tomorrow: Equity Is the Superior Growth Model

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By Pendarvis Harshaw

One day after a late winter snowstorm hit the nation's capital in March of this year, a 27-year-old man named Darren Hardy trekked through the frozen streets to bring a couple of friends into the [Black Workers Center](#) near the Anacostia Metro Station in Southeast Washington, DC. He wanted to introduce his buddies to the Center's model of building worker-owned co-ops as alternatives to low-wage jobs for Black workers, and its philosophy of building power with people through lessons on economic justice and the intersection of race and work.

To Hardy, his journey through the snow-covered city was emblematic of following in the footsteps of one of the Center's organizers, Delonte Wilkins. "I heard about [the Black Workers Center] from Delonte," said Hardy. "He brought me in, he told me it would keep me out the streets and keep me on the good path."

Wilkins and Hardy have known each other since high school, and in the past both had their share of run-ins with the law. "Before this program I was incarcerated for three years," said Wilkins. "I heard about [ONE DC](#) while incarcerated, and I got interested because they were talking about worker-owned co-ops." Wilkins said that from the time he walked through the organization's door, he felt accepted and not judged. The welcoming atmosphere kept him interested, and he spent more than a year volunteering at the Center, before landing a part-time position there

in September 2016, and in February of this year he became a full-time organizer.

The Black Workers Center in D.C. is a project of ONE DC (originally the Manna Community Development Corporation), which has been around since 1997 and has a rich history of building community power. In 2011, ONE DC won a community benefits agreement at Parcel 33 (now called Progression Place in Shaw) that led to 29 new jobs for Washingtonians, 51 affordable rental units, a community fund grant, and the designation of locally-owned community retail space. And in 2015 the organization led a rent strike that led to an agreement between low-income residents at DC's Mount Vernon Plaza, the landlord, and the City, which extended housing affordability for 63 units of housing for seven years.

In 2015, ONE DC founded the Black Workers Center as part of a larger network, [The National Black Workers Centers Project](#). The focus of the affiliated organizations changes from location to location: the [Los Angeles](#) Black Workers Center prioritizes construction contracts; the [Mississippi](#) Workers' Center for Human Rights focuses on trades and unions; and the Bay Area Black Workers Center, based in [Oakland](#), focuses on mass incarceration and reentry programs. According to Wilkins, the Black Workers Center in DC is "largely focused on the alternative economy—time banking and worker owned co-ops," and it also offers popular education on issues like housing rights and workers' rights.

Nia Nyamweya, who organizes with ONE DC alongside Wilkins and Nawal Rajeh, noted that the Black Workers Center is an example of democratic values in practice. She highlighted the importance of people like Wilkins, a native Washingtonian who Nyamweya described as "central to the movement, because he is the movement." But she also added that the BWC's work has never been about one person, it's about the larger issues. "Our work centers on the issues of race, class, and gender; and it's all seen through the Black folks in DC who are already marginalized because we're not a state," said Nyamweya.

In Washington DC's Ward 8, where the population is [almost 94 percent](#) Black and where the Black Workers Center is located, the unemployment rate was [12 percent](#) as of March 2017 – not counting people who have stopped looking for work or those who are underemployed. That number is down from the previous year, but still more than double the overall unemployment rate of [5.8 percent](#) in the District of Columbia. This concentration of unemployment in the Black community underscores the importance of the Black Workers Center's efforts to build racial and economic justice through popular education, direct action, and worker-owned alternatives to exploitation under capitalism.

To combat the marginalization happening in DC, Mississippi, California, and beyond, equity is one of the central goals of the National Black Workers Center Project.

Steven Pitts, a labor economist at the University of California, Berkeley and board member of the National Black Workers Center Project, believes that equity hinges on two things: opportunities and outcomes. "The idea of having equitable results and the idea of having equitable opportunities are a function of having a balance of power," said Pitts.

He explained that the balance of power is created by "workers having an organized voice in the workplace, in the community, and in the ballot box. After you achieve that, in those three arenas, you'll get better opportunities and better outcomes."

According to Tanya Wallace-Gobern, executive director of the National Black Worker Center Project, it's not just about opportunities and outcomes for Black workers, it's about workers on all levels of the employment spectrum, because people are being marginalized across the board. "Black economic inclusion begins with us realizing that if it's happening to those of us who are educated, legally employed, and so on — we need to create a space to understand that this is happening more to those who aren't," Wallace-Gobern said. "We are our brothers' and sisters' keeper."

For a great example of creating opportunities and better outcomes, being your brothers' and sisters' keeper, look no further than the story of Delonte Wilkins.

When he first took the job of organizer at the Black Workers Center in DC, the facility needed some work, so he tapped into his reliable resources. Several young men and women from his community — including his high school buddy, Darren Hardy — came out to help. Wilkins explained that people were happy to do it because they felt invested in the work of the Center. "People like the organization," he said. "People like having a democratic voice and a sense of ownership in the space."

Beyond the democratic voice and the fresh coat of paint on the walls, Wilkins said that the appeal of the Black Workers Center is how transparent the organization is about the economic situation in the United States. "We try to paint the picture of everything. We try to let people know about the system, our daily lives, and how it impacts relationships," he explained. "We draw the picture so people can understand what's going on and how we're being played."

In Washington DC, the price of racial economic injustice is steep. In 2014, racial gaps in income and employment [cost the regional GDP more than \\$130 billion](#). And the causes of economic injustice go beyond unfair hiring practices; inequities in education, housing, and transportation and alarming incarceration rates are all contributing factors. That's why the Black Workers Center explores how *all* aspects of the current economic system work — or don't work, depending on who and where you are. But beyond highlighting these challenges, the Center chooses to focus on building power with people to create economic alternatives. That's why Darren Hardy was so excited to bring his friends to the center.

"We had a meeting, and some people want to start a restaurant," said Hardy. "We talked to Delonte about ways to build a business for the restaurant. He's willing to work with us, but he doesn't want it to be a capitalist job. He wants it to be a fair opportunity for all: a co-op."

They haven't finalized the menu, but they know it's going to be American soul food and hors d'oeuvres — and they're going to start off by feeding their own, catering events for the Black Workers Center and ONE DC.