



WORKING FOR ECONOMIC HUMAN RIGHTS

Cheri Honkala
interviewed by Judy Duboff

Cheri Honkala is the founder and Executive Director of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU), the co-chair of the National Welfare Rights Union and a co-founder of the Up and Out of Poverty Now! Coalition. Cheri Honkala and Marian Kramer, co-presidents of the National Welfare Rights Union, have been invited to speak in Washtenaw County on September 9th and 10th (see ad this page). Judy Duboff, on behalf of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, one of the sponsoring organizations, conducted this interview with Cheri Honkala for AGENDA.

AGENDA: Can you tell us what the Kensington Welfare Rights Union is—its purpose, its composition—and how and when you first became interested in the welfare rights movement?

Cheri Honkala: The Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU) is a group of poor people struggling every day to survive, working together to meet people's basic human needs. But realize that we need to do more than just survive—we need to end poverty for everyone. The KWRU is made up and led by women and men of all colors and backgrounds, and is supported by people from all walks of life.

I myself was a homeless teenage mother, living with my son Mark in a car, when I realized that my personal struggle was not just mine. I knew that poor people everywhere need to fight both to survive and to build a movement against poverty.

AGENDA: We hear that the welfare rolls have been reduced by half in the last 3 years. What does this mean in human terms?

CH: The framers of the recent welfare reform define 'success' by reducing caseloads. But everyone who works part-time jobs, who does temporary and contingent work...every family who has to move in with their relatives, every father who has to work two jobs, every

Please join us as we welcome...

NATIONAL WELFARE RIGHTS UNION
CO-CHAIRS
CHERI HONKALA
AND
MARIAN KRAMER

IN YPSILANTI:
Thursday, Sept. 9, 1999 • 7 – 9 p.m.
Eastern Michigan University, Pray-Harrold Hall, Rm. 204
Topic: A Community "Speak Out" Against Economic Human Rights Violations Toward Low-Income People, and Welfare Reform Policies in Michigan
Sponsored by Eastern Michigan University

IN ANN ARBOR:
Friday, Sept. 10, 1999 • 12 – 2 p.m.
St. Mary's Student Parish, Newman Hall
Topic: A Grassroots Report on the State of National Welfare Reform Legislation on Low-Income and Working Families
Sponsored by The University of Michigan

** Please make canned and non-perishable food donations for the local Welfare Rights Union at each site. **

Co-sponsored by: Welfare Rights Union (WRU) of Washtenaw County, Friends of Welfare Rights (FWR), Catholic Social Services (CSS), Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), National Organization for Women (NOW), Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice (ICPJ), Washtenaw County Living Wage Organizing Committee, Michigan Poverty Law Program (MPLP), Gray Panthers, Int'l Workers of the World (IWW).

mother who has to leave her children home unsupervised, every family forced into dead end jobs or workfare...people across the country are feeling the impact of welfare reform added to years of downsizing and outsourcing. Welfare 'success' stories don't tell the real story.

AGENDA: Does the KWRU have a proposed solution to the welfare situation?

CH: We've lobbied against welfare cutbacks at city hall, in our state capital, and in Washington, and we've learned that politics as usual won't provide us with what we need to survive. We aren't arguing for a bigger and better welfare system—we are fighting for a nation that provides the human rights to food, clothing, shelters, and the right to a living-wage job. This change will not come

easily: we need to build the biggest movement this country has ever seen, so in the richest country in the world people will not go hungry.

AGENDA: How can the public in general, and academia and the labor movement in particular, become more involved?

CH: People can become involved at the local level, with the organizing that's going on in this part of the country, and at the national level with the campaign. Students and teachers have special skills and resources to contribute to this process—from doing research that contributes to our work, to helping raise funds for poor people from their own communities to attend the upcoming march. Many students and labor leaders have joined this struggle because they understand that their

futures are tied with those of the unemployed—that having a diploma or a union job can still mean you're one check away from not paying the bills. People should contact us to find out how they can get involved.

(<http://www.libertynet.org/kwru>).

AGENDA: What is the March to the United Nations in October, and what is it intended to accomplish?

CH: The March of the Americas is organized by the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, a national effort led by poor and homeless men, women, and children of all races. The Campaign includes more than 35 organizations across the country, from public housing residents facing the demolition of their housing in Chicago, to welfare recipients about to be cut off assistance in Philadelphia, to farmworkers working for poverty wages in Florida.

The March of the Americas, from Washington, DC to New York City, will bring together people from Canada, Latin America, and the United States, for an entire month, raising the issue of poverty as a violation of human rights. On October 1st, our team of lawyers will begin the process of bringing a case against the United States, indicting the U.S. for welfare reform as a violation of economic human rights.

We will march 10-15 miles a day, setting up tent cities along roadsides and at churches and union halls, and organizing protests and arts and cultural events along the way. A main purpose of the march is to link poor leaders from across the country and internationally, building the movement to end poverty in U.S. and around the world. In addition to the groups organizing the event, we hope to make connections with members of the religious community, labor unions, social workers, lawyers, doctors and nurses, and students, who will be an integral part of this process.

AGENDA: What would you like to see happen in Washtenaw County as a result of your presentations on September 9th and 10th?

CH: Well, first I think people should tell their friends, their family, anyone they know that poor people are not lazy or stupid, and are beginning to fight back to win our economic human rights. We need everybody to begin to organize in their communities, collecting documentation of economic human rights abuses and connecting people to each other and to this movement. And of course, we need people from Washtenaw County to come march with us in October. We look forward to seeing you there. ☑