

# Union members march in Inauguration Day parade

By JAMES PARKS  
National AFL-CIO

WASHINGTON, D.C. — For Maria Somma, it was a dream come true. The native of Vietnam and naturalized citizen was one of the 265 union members who braved freezing temperatures to join representatives from across the country and the armed forces to participate in the official inaugural parade for President Barack Obama. The contingent of union members taking part in the parade included members from the AFL-CIO, Change to Win and the National Education Association.

With 15 union members riding a union-made float and 250 marchers alongside, the workers' contingent was one of the largest groups in the parade. This is the first time in recent memory that workers have participated in the parade.

Fred Mason, president of the Maryland State AFL-CIO, who spearheaded the drive to include the workers' contingent in the parade, said nearly 1,500 groups applied to participate in the parade and only 100 were selected.

"The fact that 265 workers will be

in the parade is a real testament to the importance of working people and their issues to the well-being of the country," Mason said.

Somma, who lives in Pittsburgh and is a member of the United Steelworkers, rode the float representing the AFL-CIO constituency group Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA). She says labor's participation shows the power of the American Dream for all people. "It's very exciting to be welcoming a person of color into the White House and to be a part of history," she said. "This is an incredible achievement for this country. For Barack Obama to come from his background and rise to the top is not the typical American story. His inauguration is part of the transition of this nation to fully embrace all its citizens."

Marching with a banner, "America's Workers: United for Change," participants also carried flags that represented the issues most important to working families: an "Economy That Works for All," "Great Public Schools," "Good Jobs Green Jobs" and "Health Care for All." The overall



A contingent of union members from the AFL-CIO, Change to Win and the National Education Association took part in the Jan. 20 inaugural parade in Washington, D.C. With 15 union members riding the union-made float and 250 marchers alongside, the workers' contingent was one of the largest groups in the parade. Photo by Patrick G. Ryan, courtesy of the National Education Association.

theme of the labor float is "Honoring America's Workers."

The float was created by union carpenters, welders, sculptors and painters. Constructed of steel, wood and foam, it was more than 17 feet high and 24 feet long. Outlines of the diverse "faces of labor" surrounded the float as a salute to the backbone of the

United States — "the hardworking men and women who make our nation strong."

Several of the marchers in the workers' contingent said the inauguration signaled a sea change in the way the White House views workers.

"The country is coming together in a way I've never seen in my life," said

Latasha Carpenter, a member of Communications Workers of America Local 2108 in Beltsville, Md. "I'm proud that we have a president who is embracing us all as union brothers and sisters. It is so important we stand united and strong to ensure health care, good jobs, and the Employee Free Choice Act."

Riding on the float and representing the Alliance for Retired Americans had a special significance for Jimmy Allen of Bowie, Md. The retired member of the Amalgamated Transit Union, who is black, says he's seen a lot in his life, but "when it comes to an African-American being president, I said I wouldn't believe it until it happened. Now I can tell my grandchild that she can grow up and be president of the United States and mean it."

Even if you couldn't be there, you can honor this historic event with a commemorative AFL-CIO Obama T-shirt. The long-sleeve, union-designed and printed shirts say "Yes We Can" with the Inauguration Day date, January 20, 2009, under an image of President Obama. The T-shirt sells with a suitable-for-framing commemorative poster for \$30 from the The Union Shop Online. Go to ([unionshop.afl-cio.org](http://unionshop.afl-cio.org)) to order.

## Oregon Tradeswomen Inc. awarded EPA grant for 'green' job training

Oregon Tradeswomen Inc. has received a \$200,000 grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to help train workers in environmental cleanup skills.

EPA's Brownfields Program awarded 13 grants of \$200,000 each to non-profit organizations, workforce investment boards, and state and local governments, geared toward cleaning up contaminated properties and turning them into productive community assets.

Using the grant funding, OTI will train 120 participants during eight six-

week sessions. Students will be recruited from low-income, minority, unemployed or underemployed female populations in the Portland area. Trainees will receive Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response certification, as well as a certification of graduation from a state approved pre-apprentice program.

Following completion of the course, at least 78 trainees will be placed in environmental jobs. OTI has developed partnerships with labor unions that operate apprenticeship programs and with potential employers.

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