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Photographers



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415 N. Killingsworth St.,
P.O. Box 5455, Portland, OR 97228.
Telephone (503) 285-5555.

E-mail: info@theskanner.com

World Wide Web site:

<http://www.theskanner.com>

Fax: (503) 285-2900

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Threat to Blacks in the Public Sector

Radical conservative politicians want to slash city, county and state jobs — and undercut the economic security of African-American families, says this union official.

When I was growing up in Cleveland, some of the most respected people in my neighborhood were the folks who worked for the city, county or state. My father was a city bus driver who took great pride in getting people safely to and from their jobs every day. My mother was a community college teacher who loved preparing her students for success.

It turns out that my family was far from unique: Twenty-one percent of all Black workers are public employees, making the public sector the largest employer of Black workers, according to a recent University of California, Berkeley study. The wages that African Americans earn in the public sector are higher than those we earn in other industries. Furthermore, there is less wage inequality between African-American workers and nonBlack workers in the public sector than in other industries.

The author of the study, Steven Pitts of Berkeley's Center for Labor Research and Education, emphasizes that his analysis is based on the national workforce. In cities where African Americans are a larger proportion of the population, "the importance of the public sector to Black employment prospects" is even greater.

Another recent finding makes Pitts' conclusions even more significant. According to the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., although the economy is showing some signs of recovery, African Americans in 2010 had unemployment rates of

EMPLOYEES FEDERATION

Lee Saunders

at least 15 percent in severely depressed states — levels not seen since the Great Depression.

These revelations mean that the plans by radical governors to rob public employees of their rights, shrink pay and benefits, and cut jobs will have a disproportionate impact on Black families and com-

a bigger paycheck; as their "I am a man" signs made clear, they wanted respect for the work they did. King stood with them because he recognized that freedom requires that workers have a voice, the ability to provide for their families and the power to shape their destinies.

Not only do public-sector jobs mean economic security for Black families; they are also jobs that are vitally important to communities across this nation. Whether they are teachers, bus drivers, sanita-

country.

And yet instead of joining with us to find solutions and protect the rights of workers, these governors are inflicting more pain. Their only interest is in attacking our jobs, crippling our unions and dismantling public services. At a time when we should be pulling together, their tactics and rhetoric are ripping us apart.

Because so many Black families have built careers in state and local government, what these corporate-backed politicians are also doing is undercutting the economic security of Black families. Ask if this is their intention, and of course they will deny that it is. But even the best of intentions (and their intentions are far from the "best") can have unintended consequences. And there is no denying that the path they've chosen will have dire consequences for many Black families.

That's one of the many reasons African Americans, whether public employees or not, whether union members or not, are standing with the workers who are fighting back. If 21 percent of Black workers are public-sector employees, that means that one out of every five Black workers is employed by a state or local government. Our financial well-being and the economic security of the neighborhoods we live in are at stake. It is up to all of us to fight for our future.

Lee Saunders is secretary-treasurer of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

Twenty-one percent of all Black workers are public employees, making the public sector the largest employer of Black workers

munities. In other words, white America's bad cold has turned into pneumonia for Black America — and it will get worse if ultraconservative politicians cripple public-sector unions, making them incapable of protecting their members.

Both of my parents were active union members because they knew that the labor-rights and civil rights movements were the way for African Americans to achieve upward mobility and equality. In fact, labor unions and civil rights organizations have worked hand in hand in just about every fight for equality and economic justice that our nation has known.

When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, he was in Memphis, Tenn., on behalf of 1,300 sanitation workers, members of AFSCME Local 1733. They were on strike for more than

tion workers, snowplow operators, emergency medical technicians, nurses or librarians, public employees perform jobs that towns and cities of every size and description depend on. Their work strengthens neighborhoods and supports basic American values like looking out for one another, preparing our children for the future and ensuring that there is a safety net for the most vulnerable members of our country.

But if you believe the radical governors and legislators in Wisconsin, Ohio, Florida and other states, many of these jobs are unnecessary, and the workers who provide them are "coddled" because they have the right to a voice on the job. Since January 2009, state and local governments have laid off 429,000 workers, and these layoffs have already had dire effects on families across the

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Saying Good-bye to Artist Gil Scott-Heron

When I received word of the passing of noted poet and singer Gil Scott-Heron, I felt as if I had just heard about the death of a college friend whom I had not seen in many years. Perhaps it was because I actually got to know the work of Gil Scott-Heron while I was in college in the early 1970s. His albums became part of my life and his songs and messages were part of the support system on which I and many other Black radicals came to depend.

There are tremendous ironies connected with the life and work of GSH. If you listen to one of his most famous pieces, *The Bottle*, and another, *Angel Dust*, you cannot but shake your head in knowing that the brother struggled for years with his own substance abuse. The contradiction is startling in its drama. Here was someone who went out of his way to warn us all of the dangers of substance abuse, yet he fell prey to it himself. I hope that a future biographer of GSH will explore the demons that haunted him and had him live such a contradiction.

Yet, we must recognize and honor the many contributions of



TRANS AFRICA

Bill Fletcher Jr.

GSH. He and the Last Poets (actually there were two groups that both called themselves The Last Poets) are seen as the parents of Hip Hop, but that does not provide enough context. GSH arose at a critical moment in the Black

Reinvention, Malcolm spoke with the sound of contemporary jazz. GSH took the rhetoric and analysis of the radical wing of the Black Freedom Movement and the New Left, and both poetized and jazz-ized it. Whether through his famous *The Revolution* will not be televised or later work like *We beg your pardon America*, GSH grabbed hold of challenges of the moment and created a popular analysis that hit all of the right notes.

GSH was, in my opinion, at his best both when he was working with Brian Jackson, but also when his voice and sound were integral-

apartheid movement in the USA. It was a song that came out at just the right moment, inspiring us all with its fierceness and spirit of resistance. You could not listen to that song without feeling defiance in your soul and without being prepared to march. In fact, the last time that I actually saw GSH in the flesh he was performing just that song in August 1983 at the 20th anniversary of the famous March on Washington.

GSH never lost his relevance. I am always haunted by his *Message to the Messengers*, which is a tremendous illustration of reaching across the generational divide to both mentor as well as partner with younger generations, offering them lessons from the movement that shaped us.

I appreciate all that he did and all that he offered. Thank you, brother Gil.

Bill Fletcher, Jr. is a Senior Scholar with the Institute for Policy Studies, the immediate past president of TransAfrica Forum, and the co-author of Solidarity Divided. He can be reached at papaq54@hotmail.com.

Here was someone who went out of his way to warn us all of the dangers of substance abuse, yet he fell prey to it himself

Freedom Movement and the New Left. As Manning Marable notes in his biography of Malcolm X, Malcolm X: A life of

ly part of a militant social justice movement. When he sang *Johannesburg*, his words became the anthem of the anti-