Women Behind the Lines

Joan Baez Performance
To Aid Striking Workers

Month Long Strike Ends

Gov. Scott Approves
Pay Hikes For 5,000

The Lenoir Cafeteria Workers' Struggle at UNC

In the late 1960s strikes of black workers broke out all across the South. The Memphis sanitation workers' strike in 1968 was one of these, but the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. provoked an even greater upheaval. In North Carolina, black campus workers went on strike at A&T, Duke, UNC and elsewhere. At A&T, students took over buildings, partly in solidarity with striking workers, and the Governor called out the National Guard. Shots were exchanged. At Duke, the workers' strike was part of a larger "vigil" movement to protest King's murder and institutional racism. At UNC, the Lenoir workers, led by Mary Smith and Elizabeth Brooks, went on strike. Their slogan was "It isn't slavery time anymore!" Support for the workers was spearheaded by the Black Student Movement, led by Preston Dobbins. The National Guard was again called out. Nevertheless, the workers won many demands, including a pay raise for 5000 low wage state workers. Less than a year later, after UNC privatized the food services, the workers went on strike a second time. This strike, led again by Mary Smith and Elizabeth Brooks, was also settled in the workers' favor. The settlement came on the Sunday before "Black Monday," when it was expected that 2000 black students from around the state were going to descend on Chapel Hill to express their solidarity with the striking workers.

These strikes represented a new phase of the black freedom struggle. "Civil rights" had not solved the fundamental problems of oppression and exploitation faced by black workers every day. This was part of the national revolt of black workers. The UNC strike and others were also very significant in the development of the black student movement and Black Power. It was struggles like the Lenoir strikes of 1969 and black urban revolts that actually forced institutions like UNC to go beyond token desegregation. Yet the workers have received no respect for their struggle and sacrifice here at UNC. Indeed, the story of the Lenoir strikes has been distorted in official histories and scrubbed out of memory.

Today, when low wage workers of color at UNC still confront disrespect, harsh working conditions, and poverty wages, the struggle continues. It is particularly significant that there is currently a statewide movement to repeal North Carolina's "right to work law," one of the worst in the nation, which makes it illegal for public workers to negotiate a contract with management.