

ESWA CENTRAL NEW JERSEY: VOLUNTEERS ORIENTATION OUTLINE

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SECTION 1: WHOM WE REPRESENT AND WHY.

Welcome to Eastern Service Workers Association, or ESWA, for short. We are an all-volunteer run organizing drive of low-paid service and temporary workers throughout Central New Jersey, founded in 1975 to pursue short and long-term solutions to poverty conditions. We have operated 7 days-a-week since our beginning without taking a dime of government funding, or other funding with strings attached. This enables our membership the independence to determine the priorities and policies of their association. ESWA is dedicated to organizing all regardless of race, religion or immigration status.

ESWA members are the workers who do many of the backbone jobs of our economy, such as: retail, serving and preparing food in restaurants, maintenance, domestic workers, or in healthcare related fields such as nurses' aides and in-home care workers. Many others work in local factories or warehouses unloading trucks, operating machines, scanning and boxing items or cleaning, often work for some of the largest companies in the nation, such as H&M, Burlington Coat Factory and Johnson & Johnson. However, many workers are never employed permanently, instead they work through temp agencies and often at minimum wage. Our membership also includes many workers who are disabled, elderly and unemployed.

These essential jobs that our members do cover many needs in our society, *and* generate billions of dollars in wealth for our economy, however most are nonunion, and commonly are low-paying, lack medical or dental benefits, and don't provide job security. *New Jersey now has almost 200,000 fewer union jobs than the year 2000*, and union jobs pay 27% higher on average.

The common plight of our members is insufficient income for basic survival needs. Even pre-pandemic life expectancies were 14 years short of more affluent communities. In Mercer County, in

just one year, 8,400 families were evicted from their apartments and houses, and, statewide, nearly 608 families were shut off from electricity every weekday by PSEG. Climate change adds extra urgency to our daily plight: our members are most exposed to heat waves, have the least ability to respond to disasters, and are often burdened with the costs of paying for problems that were created by government policies that helped enrich a few while destroying people's lives and our planet.

The hardships didn't just happen. The economic base of Trenton, like much of this country, has been ripped away. Trenton used to be among the leading cities in the nation in the manufacture of steel cables, rubber goods, textiles, plastics and a great variety of metal products. Since the late 1960s, corporate management began to relocate production to nonunion areas within the U.S. and later moved abroad to increase their profits. While real incomes for the majority of Americans have dropped, our government's policies have handed control of necessities such as health care and utilities and to corporations that make billions in profits while denying service to those who can't afford it. We see a wealthy few get away with exploiting the majority of us until we organize as a sufficient force to stop them.

SECTION II: HISTORY OF ATTEMPTS TO ORGANIZE AND THEIR RESULTS

In Central New Jersey there were many previous attempts to organize low-paid service workers, particularly in New Brunswick and Trenton, before ESWA began, and we teach volunteers classes about this history.

Freda Smith: I will give you one particularly important example: Freda Smith, who is now deceased, was an ESWA cadre and a full-time volunteer organizer with ESWA starting in 1978. Like many ESWA members, Freda was a domestic worker when she signed up as a member. She grew up in Princeton and had a history of fighting for change that began in 1948 when she was just a teenager. Freda and her mother were involved in the Communist Party as the McCarthy era was beginning. They were involved with the civil rights case known as "The Trenton six" where six young African-American men were accused of murdering a white store owner, William Horner in Trenton. A united front of civil rights activists, trade unionists, minority organizations, legal

professionals and other concerned citizens fought to win the freedom of these men against the racist criminal justice system that was determined to sentence each of the defendants to death. Freda played an active role in the defense; including to organize white store owners and Princeton University professors to sign a petition calling for the release of the young men. The case marked the start of what would become one of the most critical civil rights battles of the last century. Ultimately five were acquitted, but only after one of the accused died in jail.

Traditionally, low-paid workers looked to the trade union movement as a way to improve their wages and living and working conditions. Some of our nation's first unions had roots in the Trenton area, and many workers gained living wage jobs that stabilized their families and communities as a result of successful, unifying tactics that unions carried out. However, our government has responded to the interests of corporate management against labor in many ways, including by passing strict labor laws which limit what trade unions are allowed to do to organize workers. Today, less than 7% of the private sector workforce in our nation is represented by unions. Our membership is the section of the workforce that is excluded from the dubious benefits of the National Labor laws: domestic workers, farm workers and independent contractors.

There were other efforts for change, but the long-term question of ending poverty and inequality rarely got on the agenda because most organizations didn't last very long, and the ones that lasted turned into government-controlled agencies. When organizations take government funding, the decision making is taken away from the local community who suffers from the problems, regardless of the best intentions of the organizers or directors of a group. Government-funded associations are restricted in their ability to fight to change government policies, and, government funding is very unstable so many organizations have closed their doors when the funding is cut.

Therefore, in our analysis, we need a new strategy and approach for labor, which can fight for decency for All working people so no one is left behind.

SECTION III: BEGINNING OF THE LOCAL DRIVE

We began in 1975 in New Brunswick, when some Rutgers professors and grad students heard of the success of a farm worker organizing drive in Suffolk County, Long Island and a similar organization of domestic workers in Sacramento, California. They requested assistance from the farm worker effort to begin a drive of the same type for domestic workers in New Brunswick. We established an Organizing Committee which is made up of individuals who have deep roots in different sectors of our community. The Organizing Committee members backed the drive and helped to get ESWA off the ground with a solid foundation. The following year, 1976, some of the supporters of the New Brunswick drive who lived in Princeton, requested organizers to assist in beginning the same type of organization for domestic workers in Princeton. Three years later, the Mercer County office would move to Trenton, when members advised that workers in Trenton needed organization of this type even more so than the domestic workers in Princeton. In 2019, we merged these two efforts to establish the Central New Jersey ESWA, based in our state capital of Trenton.

Canvass: Our society keeps poor people isolated and divided – particularly by race, immigration status, and drowning in problems. We organize daily to overcome these artificial divisions. Each Saturday, we mobilize teams of volunteers to canvass in neighborhoods where low-income workers live throughout the Trenton area. On the canvass we walk house to house, in teams, and invite people to join as members, make the benefit program available to members, and take information down about the current problems we find workers facing in their lives and in their work situations. Primarily through the canvass, we've signed up more than 25,000 members since we began in 1975.

Benefit Program: ESWA members run a free-of-charge Benefit Program including emergency food, clothing, legal information and advice, preventive medical care, advocacy to stop utility shutoffs and more. These benefits help members overcome the constant crises that come with poverty and gain the stability to organize to eliminate the systemic causes of our poverty. The Benefit Program is run through a self-help approach which is empowering; members who receive help are also learning how to organize and fight for other members. **[Explain Pandemic Response]**

And again, we take no government funding, so we actually organize all of these resources

through constant outreach to schools, churches and communities within and outside of Trenton to meet individuals and groups that have more resources and can help with their time or resources. It's a constant process of bringing together people from all corners of the community to tackle the problems of poverty together.

SECTION IV: OUR STRUCTURE AND HOW WE MOVE FORWARD

ESWA members are encouraged to attend and give input at meetings of the Central New Jersey Workers Benefit Council, or WBC, where membership decisions are made through consensus. Members learn to be delegates, and represent the voice of others—such as coworkers on a job, or their neighborhood. Delegates bring the problems and concerns of other members to the Workers Benefit Council, for example about not being paid on the job or about a hospital being shut down, and then make decisions with other members to form a plan of action. Once we have a plan, delegates bring the decisions of the WBC to get others involved in the struggle to carry out the plan.

We have a continuous track record of fighting and winning *collective* victories that make a tangible difference. This has included winning recognition for temporary workers who were being blacklisted when they protested the exploitative conditions they face; forcing the City to take action on unaddressed public health problems like rat infestations; stopping illegal use of eminent domain in New Brunswick that was causing people to lose their housing; to more recently winning hundreds of millions of dollars for ratepayers who were being gouged by the energy companies and stopping utility shutoffs for thousands of people.

SECTION V: THE CADRE SYSTEM AND ON-THE-JOB TRAINING

Our strategy is political simple: we unite the many to stop the ability of a wealthy few to enrich themselves at our expense. However, it is logistically complicated. Decisions about weekly activities and plans for ESWA are made at the weekly Saturday staff meeting. The Operations Manager lays out our strategic overview, and volunteers and cadre who have areas of responsibility make reports and proposals on next steps. Any friend of ESWA is encouraged to attend, learn about the upcoming

activities and give input on how to accomplish the objectives of the week.

We use a unique method of organizing here called systemic organizing, which is a method of dividing the work into systems, or component parts, with distinct responsibilities. In this manner, we can incorporate the participation of thousands of people from all walks of life to make real contributions of time or resources.

We build the systems through training organizers on-the-job, and we can grow by recruiting and training new volunteers to take responsibility for part of the organization and expanding into new sectors of the population. We have an educational component to our work and teach volunteer classes about our history, theory and strategy, as well as about the history of past attempts for change, so that any volunteer can be empowered and advance as responsible leadership. In this way, our success or survival is not dependent on one great leader or charismatic individual, which has destroyed organizations in the past. We always say that the newest volunteer is the most important, because we can teach you everything that we've learned through 46 years of collective experience, and you can take that and add to it. That is why the newest volunteer can be the largest contributor.

Cadre: Our struggle is challenging; it takes learning from the past, fighting to meet the day-to-day needs of the membership, and constantly expand our reach and providing leadership to more sectors of the community. It takes time, effort and commitment to see it through. Therefore, one of the most important aspects of our structure is that people can become full-time professional volunteer organizers, or cadre. Anyone wants to learn how to build a fighting organization can get a training program to be an organizer and can run a part of the organization. We encourage everyone to try out fulltime organizing!

SECTION VI: CONCLUSION

We're happy you're with us here at ESWA. We believe real change can be made, but it requires people and a great deal of hard work to carry it out. All 193 member nations of the United Nations including the United States government, adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals [**SHOW SDGs IN newspaper**]. This is about transforming our world to secure the needs of people and our planet, and

it is a pledge to ensure no one is left behind. The first goal is to end poverty in all its forms everywhere, and goal 13 is to take urgent action on climate change. However, our government has done nothing to implement the 2030 Agenda, and most people in the country don't even know anything about it as the media has blacked it out. We carry out daily actions that represent the SDGs —like fighting to end poverty; this is the change our world needs, and we must demand our government put the resources of our nation to make the 2030 Agenda a reality.

There are powerful economic and political forces that don't want to see real change in this country. But we say with confidence that ESWA is a material manifestation of hope for the empowerment of service and temporary workers. We encourage you to see firsthand our strengths and weaknesses and to make your own decision. We invite and need your participation at all levels. *We're here to win and here to stay.*

[INTRODUCE THE VOLUNTEER(S) TO THE PERSON GIVING THE TOUR. DO A FORMAL PASSALONG]