



Nelson Johnson at the Greensboro Word and World School.

Reflections on an Attempt to Build “Authentic Community” in the Greensboro Kmart Labor Struggle

by Nelson Johnson

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Note: the kind of community, faith, and labor coalition the upcoming Word and World school in Memphis will explore was in some ways pioneered during the Greensboro Kmart Labor Struggle. That struggle modeled a paradigm of wholeness—whereby the well-being of workers is connected to the well-being of the entire community—that a culture predicated upon division often fails to see or actively seeks to dissolve.

I want to first express my appreciation for the value of this conversation about the intersection of the labor and civil rights movements. It has raised many meaningful insights that stretch my consciousness and challenge my beliefs. This conversation has also reaffirmed my own sense of what each participant in this Symposium wants and that is authentic community that is healthy and sustainable. All of our work should, in some way, move us towards being such a community. If it does not, it is problematic.

The struggle for economic justice, for gender and racial justice, and other forms of social justice at the Kmart distribution center in Greensboro was momentous for that city. It transcended labor/management boundaries as well as traditional civil rights boundaries such that people who were not substantially involved in either movement became involved in the Greensboro Kmart struggle.

The result was relatively positive and somewhat complex. It is difficult for me to capture all the dimensions involved in the struggle. The success of the Greensboro Kmart struggle was due to many factors. First, was the courage, commitment, and sacrifice of five hundred workers who believed in their cause and whose work called the Greensboro community to greater responsibility and accountability. Second, the union, UNITE (Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees), had grit, persistence, a creative spirit, and the will to search for methods that worked under the circumstances in Greensboro, including forging meaningful relationships with people outside of the union.

Both the attitude and determination of workers and the union were critical factors, but another key factor was an approach I call the authentic community approach, which suggested a way for everybody to be a part of the struggle. My reflections on the struggle in Greensboro are mainly from the perspective of the community. While I realize the limitations of this approach, it is the view that guided by thinking in that struggle and I would like to share it with you.

Every event, activity, and struggle occurs within some kind of context. Perhaps a better way to put it is that we approach things with some assumptions, conscious or unconscious, which provide a context for us. Ultimately, we derive meaning from the framework, understanding, and context that we bring to our involvement. Today, we live in a context of extraordinary fragmentation. Our language itself is a language of fragmentation. We are invited to be pitted against each other even when we know our plights are linked together. Fragmentation is such a deep part of our culture that it has become a way of thinking that naturally surfaces in our words, in our language, and in the way we frame issues.

In Greensboro, there was a tremendous debate to define what the Kmart struggle was all about—to provide a context and a definition to the struggle so as to avoid being led into greater and greater fragmentation. Out of that debate different people came to understand what their relationship to this effort ought to be and what meaning it had for them.

One way of framing the struggle defined the Kmart dispute as a struggle between a company and its workers. Such an understanding of the struggle was extremely limited. It was reduced to one company and group of employees. This framing invited us to be for the company and against the workers, for the workers and against the company, or not involved at all. In this formulation there was very little way for the whole community to get a handle on the real issue and develop a meaningful relationship to the struggle. A slightly expanded variation of “a company and a group of workers” was the framing of the struggle as a “labor versus management” dispute. This framing simply expanded from one company to the management class and from one group of laborers to a broader group of laborers. It was still framed so as to split the community.

At some point the struggle was framed as a Northern-inspired-union struggle against the justice-loving non-union people of Greensboro. This formulation dripped with historical race and regional prejudices going back to the Civil War. If one accepted such a framing as the primary way to understand what was happening, the struggle at the Kmart distribution center would become an irresolvable conflict.

The racial aspect of the struggle was major and significant. Some viewed this as primarily a racial struggle in which we were invited to be opposed to people who did not understand race and who did not appreciate it. Conversely, the framing invited some to think of the Kmart dispute as an economic struggle without racial dimensions. That did not wash with most black people.

Because race discrimination and low wage scale were alleged to be part of the problem at the Kmart distribution center, the question was often raised, “is this a race struggle or an economic struggle?” Of course, the inherent notion in that question was the notion that there is something defined as a “pure race issue” unassociated with economic factors or that there was a “pure economic issue” involving black and white people in this country without any elements of race or racism. I usually responded by saying: “if you can tell us whether slavery was ‘just a race matter’ or ‘just an economic matter,’ we will be able to help you understand the race/economic dimension of the Kmart struggle.” Obviously race and economics are inextricably linked in such a way that to seek some “pure separation” does violence to reality and makes no sense. It was another invitation to fragmentation. A “pure race” struggle would mean you are for blacks and minorities (implication against whites) and a “pure economics” struggle would be interpreted to mean you are for whites (implication, denial of racial discrimination and therefore alienation of many blacks and other minorities). With these formulations of fragmentation, many political, civic, economic, educational, and other leaders in the community argued that the rest of the community does not have a major stake in the issue or a major role to play in resolving it.

It relieves almost everybody of any major responsibility. All of those ways of framing the situation axiomatically invite division and limit those who are involved in the struggle. Even if the struggle is broadened, unless there is clarity in the framing of it, we are invited into the struggle on the basis of fear, confusion, distortions, misinformation, prejudices, and false self-interest. There is little hope to grow towards authentic community without altering this simplistic way of approaching issues in a community.

It was against the background of fragmentation, confusion, and fear that I have just described that I tried to raise with others an alternative framework that is roughly called community. If we think of humanity in terms of something other than the categories that society offers us, as being bigger and much more interrelated than the sum of these fragmented categories, the question is, how do we talk about its parts without pitting them against each other? There is a biblical analogy that says the eye is not against the foot, the hand is not against the ear, and so forth. The different parts of the body serve different functions in the body although sometimes they go off and do things they ought not to do. In the long run, however, one part of the body can never benefit from the destruction or harm to another part if they all have an authentic function as part of the body as a whole. Another way to say this is that the well-being of the whole depends on the well-being of the parts and the well-being of the parts depends on the well-being of the whole. It is therefore in everyone's interest to promote the well-being of all the different parts of the whole.

I believe the single most important aspect of the Greensboro Kmart struggle was to define for ourselves (the Pulpit Forum), and then with others, what this struggle was really about—what the real issues were. Those of us in the Pulpit Forum, including myself, struggled mightily for clarity in this area. Obviously the union versus management is a part of it. Race and economics are also parts of it. All of these aspects are legitimate and all have to be affirmed. The problem is finding a way to talk about wholeness and not to limit ourselves to seeing only independent parts pitted against each other.

The Pulpit Forum felt that the primary issue boiled down to the unjust treatment of five hundred men and women, the majority of whom are black, all of whom are fully human, and all of whom are part of this community. We reasoned that if fellow citizens can see that the struggle is about the mistreatment and disrespect of members of this community who are laborers, then this can ultimately become a struggle in which the whole community has the opportunity to affirm itself. The challenge was to discover creative ways to stand with the workers in such a way that others could join us and together we could all stand for the best interest of the whole community. With this approach no one is exempt. We said to ourselves and everyone else, "you may play different roles, you may be in different positions to do different things, but you are not exempt from this call to help forge deep and abiding justice by working together for justice with the Kmart workers."

The Pulpit Forum worked hard to make the point that this struggle is about justice, it is about doing the right thing by our neighbors. We said that when fellow members of our community allege that they are slapped around, forced into hot places, patted on the behind, subjected to all kinds of disrespectful actions, and paid an average of five dollars less an hour than others doing the same work in other cities, then all of our instincts for justice need to be activated, and we all need to get involved in resolving this unacceptable situation.

Whether they wanted to admit it or not, everyone in the community was already involved, mostly in unconscious and negative ways. Race and racism clearly played a role in the controversy. In a very real sense blacks in the country, in the South, and in the Greensboro Kmart plant in particular, are victims of racism. In Greensboro, Kmart's only distribution center with a majority black work force, the company was paying an average of five dollars an hour below that of its other twelve distribution centers—seemingly a racist policy. Not only does racism devalue all of us, but also it pulls down the wage scale for everyone. No matter what one's race, our interests are so linked such as to mistreat one race is ultimately to harm all; so an important aspect of the struggle was to help people to see how in the end their best interests are linked together.

Let me say a word about community and how I understand community. There are two aspects to community and people generally do not distinguish them. One aspect of community focuses on the spatial dimensions—where I live, in the black community, this neighborhood, or that neighborhood, etc. When using the word in this manner, people are often talking about a place. But at the very same time people also use the term community to describe relationships. The relationship dimension is the part we want to highlight. From a positive perspective, “being a community” is mutually supporting and affirming relationships between people and between networks of people who uphold the dignity, worth, and potentiality of each other. This notion of community is not limited to what people are doing at a particular moment. It also involves a deep belief that people are capable of doing something powerfully new, exciting, and positive. That is the potentiality dimension of community. In that sense, community transcends space, current activity, and limiting labels. In still a broader sense, it is in the interest of everyone to preserve the earth, not to degrade it. Thus, part of struggling for community involves engaging the behavior of corporate citizens who devalue the earth. In particular, we should engage the tendency of companies to locate in an area, cheapen labor, and then proceed to abuse the land, air, and water. Everyone is harmed when such things happen, and everyone benefits when we work together to prevent the destruction of the environmental aspect of community.

Another way of seeing community is as a whole. When looked at in this way one must exhibit an unwillingness to support a part that does harm to another part and therefore to the whole. We are obligated to stand with whomever we have to stand with at any particular moment. As with the biblical witness, one stands with the least and the lame, the lost and the downtrodden, but in so doing, one stands for the whole. We must rediscover how to do that.

Through their determined struggle, the workers at Kmart helped the community and helped pastors, in particular, rediscover the deeper meaning of our own vocation. As a result of the dedication and determination of the workers at the Kmart distribution center, the faith community came to rediscover what it means to “walk by faith.” We believe that the workers at the distribution center can be properly credited for helping Greensboro become a better city.

Workers came to Pulpit Forum meetings and told compelling stories about the conditions at the distribution center and about their personal injuries and mistreatment. They would say, “My back is hurting, something fell on my foot and nobody paid me any attention, people called me names out of character with who I am and no one did anything about it.” They described how they visited with and pleaded with the politicians of this city and how the politicians said it was not their fight. They described how they challenged the economic and various other leaders who said it was not their fight. So they came to talk to us, the religious leaders, and what could we say, “it’s not our fight?” No, the Forum told them, it is our fight because you are our brother and you are our sister and we are going to stand with you. In the short term we will stand against the distribution center. Yet, ultimately we are standing for those who oppose the workers because we believe that those who oppose the workers become better persons when they come to understand that if one brother or sister in the community is being pulled down, the entire community is being pulled down. It is in that sense that we tried to frame this struggle as a struggle for authentic community with labor as the central issue.

In grappling with our own understanding of what we were called to do, we came to see that it is not just about saying a few sympathetic words from the pulpit about the conditions of workers. Rather, the deeper challenge was to actually stand with the workers at their lowest point so that whatever happens to them happens to us. In that sense an identity is created that spiritually transcends the “special interest” framing—whether labor, management, unions, or race. All those things are included, but the struggle is not reducible to these “special interest” categories. Our effort was to help the community see that this struggle was about doing what is good, right, and just with respect to any part of the community is in the interest of this whole community.

There are several things that happened in this struggle that pulled against the direction we were advocating. First there was an attempt to isolate the workers. The newspapers published some ugly articles that called Kmart workers, who were determined to fight for their own well-being, “fools” for being dupes of swift-witted union organizers. These workers were called fools merely because they reminded us that a person cannot live on \$6.50 an hour—they cannot pay the rent, take care of their children, or prepare for the future of their families on such low wages.

In response to the tactic of isolating and negatively defining workers, we tried to show how the city and county encouraged Kmart to establish its distribution center in Greensboro by spending tax money, and building water lines and roads. We tried to show that it should be unacceptable to every citizen of Greensboro for the city and county to invite Kmart to establish a distribution center in the city and then stand by as the company abuses members of our community.

We tried to show that when the Chamber of Commerce ("Chamber") claimed that they were not involved in the problem at the plant, that just as not true. Our response to the Chamber's position was, "You are deeply involved in what is happening at the Kmart distribution center, you are just involved in the wrong way." We challenged the Chamber to get involved in the right



way, to join in correcting the situation that they had helped create. Responding to the challenge that they were in fact involved in the Kmart dispute, the Chamber claimed that they did not know the management and other leaders of the Kmart Corporation. Our response was, "Certainly you know them, you planned a major golf tournament together (the Kmart Greater Greensboro Open) and you are out there on the golf course drinking together and dancing all over the green and now you say you don't know each other! We simply do not accept this view." Because the traditional establishment attempted to isolate the workers, we felt it our duty to stand with the workers so that they could not be isolated. We determined that if they were isolated, then we clergy would be isolated along with them.

Second, there were attempts to confuse everybody by putting out various formulations of what the struggle at the plant was about. It was labeled a union/non-union matter and therefore not the concern of the general population. The role of pastors and churches getting involved was publicly criticized. As the purpose of distorted formulations was better understood, it helped toward the strengthening of the determination of the clergy.

Another tactic was essentially to bribe a part of our community. After a while, Kmart sent money to the local chapter of the NAACP; in the middle of the struggle Kmart gave the NAACP thousands of dollars to tutor children. We viewed this as an attempt to split the black community, isolate pastors, and create greater confusion. This tactic brought us in direct conflict with our historical allies and friends. It did not work, however, as we sat down with the NAACP leadership to help them see what was happening and to make clear that none of us should compromise the well-being of our community for a few thousand dollars. It is to the NAACP's credit that they sent back all the money that they had not spent, thereby helping the NAACP to become a positive part of the struggle instead of being used against it. The NAACP came to affirm their own dignity and worth by standing with the Kmart workers and thereby strengthening the spirit of authentic community.

Finally, there was intimidation. When the first major citywide rally was

In response the police department faxed memos to all of the pastors with the "day of rage" quote telling us that we were involved in something we did not understand—that we did not know what we were dealing with. The police said that they knew the union, that the pastors did not know the union, and that while they trusted us they thought that we were being quite naïve in thinking that we had anything to do with what was really going to happen. They asserted that the union had a secret plan that we did not know about. We responded by telling the police chief, the sheriff, the county and city managers, and the school superintendent that we trusted the people we were dealing with. We explained that we had worked out real understandings. We had not always agreed with the union, but we were clear that we were dealing with people of honesty, integrity, and principle. We requested a special meeting with all the city, county, and school system officials involved so that we could put an end to fear and distortions being circulated. We assured city and county officials that local and regional union leaders would be present. We made it clear that we were disappointed that our civic and political leaders were behaving in such a fashion.

We stood together with the union representatives and workers and explained to the city, county, and school system leaders what our basic plans were. We told them, "Now, don't you all be drawing these guns and pulling these sticks out here because we have an agreement on what we are going to do." We made it clear that whatever we did, there would be no violence. We worked out an agreement with the police about what was going to occur, though the city did not quite hold to the agreement. The point is that the Forum was prepared to struggle with the police, the union, the Chamber, and the political leaders if that was necessary to get everyone to understand that each party had a role to play in the struggle.

Although the community was coming together, we felt that Kmart was persisting in its position of negotiating in bad faith, stalling, and spreading confusion, often with the aid of local leaders. Against this stance, the pastors and the workers led the community in an economic boycott of Kmart's retail stores in the region. We also began several months of civil disobedience. We got arrested mainly on Sunday afternoons after church for trespassing at the huge Super Kmart store. About four months after the boycott and about three months after the civil disobedience, not only were we beginning to get through to the local establishment, but also Kmart signaled that it was prepared to bargain in good faith. After the boycott and civil disobedience, many local establishment leaders who previously would not talk seriously with us decided that it was time to talk. We started to meet weekly with business leaders and the Mayor in an effort to "end this unrest."

Although we were meeting with local officials, organizing continued. With the union's help, churches were getting in touch with other churches all over the nation. The Presbyterians had 200,000 shares of Kmart stock they were prepared to withdraw at their national meeting. All of the religious denominations, particularly the black ones, were made aware that ministers were going to jail with the workers. The pastors went to jail first because we wanted to define this struggle as a community struggle with labor as the central issue. The workers then followed. The pastors and workers were then joined by students, some civic leaders, white pastors, and many white students and activists. Those who chose not to commit civil disobedience contributed in many other ways. There was no greater tribute on King's holiday than for all of us to go to jail in support of the Kmart workers and that is exactly what we did. King day of 1996 was a high point of the struggle for it was a statement that we were determined to be a just and inclusive community.

The establishment leaders, however, fought against the spirit of inclusiveness. Some business leaders in particular did not even want workers at regular community meetings that the Pulpit Forum began to have with the business leaders. We made it clear that we did not agree with their position. We asked, "Did they think something was wrong with the workers that they did not deserve to be in the meeting?" We argued that the workers are our neighbors, members of our churches, citizens of this city, and indeed members of this community. Their vital interest was at stake. How could our community have a serious discussion without the workers being present? The Forum made it clear that we would not continue to meet with the business leaders if they did not allow workers to come to the meetings. In the end, workers came to the meetings, laid out their stories, and we struggled together about where to go from there. The inclusion of workers in the religious leaders' and business leaders' meetings was another victory for authentic community.

In retaliation to our community efforts Kmart sued selected pastors, workers, and staff members of the union claiming we were causing them great damage. This was after they had gone around for months saying that there was no damage, that the boycott was having no effect whatsoever. The day they announced their lawsuit was a wonderful day! The Forum could not wait to get to the state Baptist Convention ("Convention") to announce that we had been sued for standing with the poor and to ask what our sisters and brothers in the ministry were going to do about it. The Convention supported us. The more Kmart took actions such as suing us, the more we were able to broaden the struggle and continue to say that nobody is excluded from participating in this struggle because everyone is included in the community. We continued to say this is our community's struggle with labor as the central issue.

Eventually Kmart came to the table. I think it was the capacity of the community to "come to itself" and be more of an authentic community that convinced Kmart that it was in their interest to negotiate in good faith. A good first contract was agreed upon after a month or so of serious negotiations. It took the workers, the union, the religious leaders, the business leaders, the students, the community activists, and hundreds of everyday citizens, all playing an important role, to get the job done. This is often called coalition building. I call it moving towards authentic community. The local organization that provided the structure of engagement and reconciliation was the Beloved Community Center. Through the Beloved Community Center, and with the Pulpit Forum playing a leading role, our community came closer to being united in real purpose than I have seen in the thirty-five years that I have lived here.

What I learned from the effort to forge authentic community is that the spirit of community has a powerful appeal if you can get out of the box of being pitted against each other. We all need to recognize the particularity of existence, but we also need to realize that in the end we are all interrelated as part of a greater whole. It is crucial to realize that we are all linked together in the common enterprise of being more human and indeed in the great work of creating a more just society and a more peaceful world.



I think it is important to acknowledge some of the limitations of the community approach as I have set it forth. One of the limitations of this concept is connected to multi-national corporations and the degree to which a local community can impact them. In the case of Kmart, a thirty-five billion dollar corporation, the city of Greensboro represented less than one half of one percent of its gross retail market. Thus even a boycott, unless it could be significantly expanded, would not actually have hurt Kmart that much. Also a distribution center almost by definition is required to be in the region it is serving. It was, therefore, hard for the Kmart distribution center to relocate.

That is not true with many other businesses. So, one question is how can communities engage large, powerful corporate entities that have the flexibility to move? Some hope lies in building networks of communities that are increasingly connected with each other through religion, unions, and other ties.

I cannot overemphasize that the spirit of daring to stand for each other and to stand for the good of the whole must be consciously promoted as an alternative to our current fragmented, narrow consciousness. We are challenged to continue to expand the network of positive community building work. This should include, where possible, a positive relationship with unions and communities in other nations also impoverished by unjust working relationships.

The authentic community approach can, I believe, serve unions well in the decade to come; it is a continuation and further development of the coalition orientation unions have long fostered. Authentic community building as a way to do union work will require, however, that unions engage in creative thinking and planning about its role in promoting the linking of struggles strategically in such a way that a network of authentic community building processes is forged. To be sure, there are real limitations to the authentic sustainable community as it relates to unionization and social change. I am persuaded, however, that this concept makes sense as a way to carry out transformative organizing such that the workers benefit, the unions benefit, the religious community benefits, and the business community benefits. In fact, all the people of a given community stand to benefit because we would be learning together to break through the culture of fragmentation and domination and truly begin to become our "brother's and sister's keepers." We gleaned just a little of this possibility in the Greensboro Kmart Struggle.

Jorge the Church Janitor Finally Quits
Cambridge, Massachusetts

No one asks
where I am from,
I must be
from the country of janitors,
I have always mopped this floor.
Honduras, you are a squatter's camp
outside the city
of their understanding.

No one can speak
my name,
I host the fiesta
of the bathroom,
stirring the toiled
like a punchbowl.
The Spanish music of my name
is lost
when the guests complain
about toilet paper.

What they say
must be true:
I am smart,
but I have a bad attitude.

No one knows
that I quit tonight,
maybe the mop
will push on without me,
sniffing along the floor
like a crazy squid
with stringy gray tentacles.
They will call it Jorge.

-Martin Espada

Lazarus and the Rich Man

Hamlet, North Carolina

(Luke 16:19-31)

That man dressed fine as Sunday every day of the week. Owned Imperial Food Products—poultry processors. Had a plant right here in town. Every morning, early, the workers would line up at the front gates—mostly women, mostly black folk, some with joints froze up from working those machines, some with emphysema from working the pantyhose factory down the road, but all wanting their babies to eat half as good as what sat on that rich man's table every evening 'round supper time.

Well, he got to worrying that some folks might start stealing his chicken parts, so he took to locking up the factory doors once the morning shift was in place. The time came when a hydraulic line blew on one of the deep-fat fryers and black smoke filled up the room, followed by grease fire. None of the state-of-the-art, automatic, carbon dioxide sprinklers ever came on. Most folks died at the south end of the building near the walk-in freezer. They had headed for the exit, but it was locked. Then they were drawn on by gulps of cool air. Some died down at the loading dock. Piled up on each other trying to get through the small hole between the wall and the truck blocking the platform. There was Mary Alice Whit. She was dead. There was Peggy Fairley.

She was dead. There was Lillian Mary Wall, who'd only worked chicken a few months. She was dead. And Margaret Banks. When they brought her out, you could already tell she was dead. All in all, there were 25 who died that day. The Hamlet police lieutenant said you couldn't tell whether the bodies were white or black on account of the smoke; but the angels, who pay no mind to color, came and carried every single one of them up into the arms of Abraham.

Now, all of this happened the day after Labor Day. And even though Imperial didn't allow no organizing in its plants, the North Carolina Textile Workers Union still sent dresses (and suits for the men) to use as burying clothes. At the First Baptist Church the mourners cried out "Lord, Lord," maybe because in the confusion they had missed the angels. They cried out "Slavery time's been over! How much longer is it going on?" To which there was just no good answer. What all happened to the rich man was never much covered in the newspapers, but the actual truth is his story's been told before.

-Rose Marie Berger.

Psalm for Distribution

Lord,
On 8th Street
Between 6th Avenue and Broad-
way
In Greenwich Village
There are enough shoe stores
With enough shoes
To make me wonder
Where there are shoeless people
On the earth.

Lord,
You have to fire the Angel
in charge of distribution.

Jack Agueros