



# Non-majority North Carolina: Cummins Diesel Engine Workers Breathe New Life into an Old Organizing Model

New Labor Forum  
2015, Vol. 24(2) 106–110  
Copyright © 2015, The Murphy Institute,  
City University of New York  
Reprints and permissions:  
[sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav](http://sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav)  
DOI: 10.1177/1095796015578150  
[nlf.sagepub.com](http://nlf.sagepub.com)

**Mariya Strauss**

## Keywords

corporations, collective bargaining, community organizations, labor, racism, union democracy, unorganized workers, working class, industry

Loud, dirty diesel engines move just about every load imaginable. Their smoke and roar are so ubiquitous that one's brain almost does not register them; yet every piece of heavy construction equipment, every big-rig truck, every school bus, most boats, and many of the pickup trucks on the road run on diesel. And the engines are big business. Cummins, Inc., which manufactures and distributes diesel engines, reported a whopping \$1.2 billion in profits for the third quarter of 2014<sup>1</sup>; shares of its stock are expected to rise by as much as 15 percent this year.<sup>2</sup>

But that large pile of cash has not flowed equitably to the workers at Cummins' engine assembly plant in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, one of eleven such Cummins facilities in the United States. The Rocky Mount plant, located in eastern North Carolina's Black Belt, has about a thousand employees, with another three hundred or so temp and subcontracted workers doing everything from working the assembly line to providing housekeeping, painting, and other services for the plant. The Rocky Mount facility has a majority African-American workforce. Globally, Cummins employs a workforce of 47,900 people.<sup>3</sup>

The Rocky Mount Engine Plant (RMEP) is nestled in the northeast quadrant of the least-unionized state in the country: just 2.9 percent of North Carolina's workers belong to unions, and seven years after the start of the Great Recession, its unemployment rate remains among the highest in the nation. Against those punishing odds, and without a majority of

workers signing union cards, thirty-year employee Jim Wrenn, who serves as president of the Carolina Auto, Aerospace & Machine Workers Union (CAAMWU), a branch of the United Electrical Workers (UE) Local 150, and his coworkers at RMEP have built a union anyway.

***Local 150 [has] achieved a degree of solidarity, activism, and community alliances that would be the envy of unions in more union-friendly regions.***

CAAMWU members have spent twenty years wielding a combination of time-tested non-majority union weapons to maintain a continuous shop-floor organizing project, winning victories along the way. These victories include a paid Martin Luther King Jr. Day holiday for the engine assembly line workers (CAAMWU is still fighting for the holiday for the temp and subcontracted workers) and, in June of 2014, an across-the-board raise of 80 cents per hour for the Cummins workers. With no contract, no majority, no ability to require workers to join the union, and a reserve labor force of temps, the workers of CAAMWU/UE Local 150 have achieved a degree of solidarity, activism, and community alliances that would be the envy of

unions in more union-friendly regions of the country. How have they made this old model of organizing—not long ago considered to be a relic of pre-National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) America—work in Rocky Mount?

## Bedrock of Community Support

Part of the answer lies in the bedrock of support CAAMWU has created for itself within the communities surrounding the Rocky Mount plant. “CAAMWU grew out of a local tradition of community organizing,” Essie Ablavsky, a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst who wrote her undergraduate thesis on non-majority unions, told me. The majority of the Cummins workers live in and around Nash, Edgecombe, and Halifax counties. Within those counties, some are concentrated in three communities near Rocky Mount, about an hour and a half east of Chapel Hill: Enfield, Battleboro, and Whitakers.

Those three communities are majority African-American, as well. But, twenty-five years ago, their elected town councils, police forces, and mayors were all white. This was a problem because it meant that local policies did not always reflect the priorities of the electorate.

Racial justice was one such priority. In the early 1980s, some workers from the Rocky Mount area formed a group called Black Workers for Justice; they formed organizing committees inside several workplaces around the region, growing throughout the 1980s to form a national organization. Toward the late 1980s, Black Workers for Justice formed a committee inside the Cummins plant. The Cummins workers’ unionization campaign started in earnest in 1990, against the backdrop of this ongoing black workers’ organizing effort.

As a focal point of their campaign in 1990, Cummins (then known as Consolidated Diesel Company or CDC) workers chose an issue that mattered as both an economic justice issue and a community racial justice issue: winning a paid holiday for the assembly line workers for Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday. The workers and community members signed petitions, got local church leaders to write letters of support, and held press conferences. After eight months of sustained organizing, the CDC Workers

Unity Committee won the paid MLK holiday for the workers.

Following the win, the Workers Unity Committee joined with a community association in the unincorporated area of Bloomer Hill (adjacent to the plant) to sponsor an annual MLK Day celebration—now a twenty-five-year tradition. Out of this work grew the Community Empowerment Alliance (CEA), which continues to be a strong organization fighting for justice in the Battleboro, Whitakers, and Enfield area.

Wrenn, who speaks using few words and keeps records on the union’s history and the labor history of the region, said the CEA has been active in both plant struggles (like the 1996 reinstatement of two unfairly fired Cummins workers) and community struggles.

## Electing Black Leaders

One such struggle has been the push to make local government more representative of the population. As Wrenn wrote in a 2002 column in *Labor Notes*, “The 1993 MLK Celebration raised the issue of the black majority town of Whitakers still being under an all-white town government after 100 years.”<sup>4</sup> Cummins activists and the CEA saw that to win policies that would benefit everyone equally, they would not only have to organize within the plant but also have to break the entrenched political power structures in their towns.

So, the CEA followed the MLK Day victory with a massive voter registration drive aimed at getting more African-Americans into leadership. “It was significant,” says Wrenn of this campaign that lasted through the 1990s and early 2000s. “You had basically white minority governments that we were up against.” As civil rights historian Michael Honey argued in his 1993 book *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*, the work of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s to win not only equality under the law but also economic justice for African-Americans has remained unfinished in many Southern states. “We were fighting for black majority rule,” Wrenn recalls. Eventually, the CEA and the Cummins workers together made progress. “It’s mostly African-American women on the council now,” he says of Whitakers. “Even the mayor is an African-American woman.”

Meanwhile, the Cummins workers continued to steadily build their union. By 2001, the Cummins Workers Unity Committee joined with another UE committee at a plant in Greenville, North Carolina to form the Carolina Auto, Aerospace & Machine Workers Union—and CAAMWU was born.

## Holding Management Accountable

In addition to its community work, the union weaves another practice into its non-majority organizing: assiduously documenting and calling management out, both when it violates labor regulations and when it contravenes its own policies. Though there is no union contract, the union holds Cummins accountable to its side of the employee handbook, and it helps workers file discrimination complaints under equal employment opportunity law. “They use the legal tools that are available to them,” said Ablavsky. “Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) charges, wage and hour claims, EEOC complaints. A lot of people just don’t have the know-how to navigate those administrative bodies. CAAMWU has been helping them.”

***Though there is no union contract, [CAAMWU] holds Cummins accountable to its side of the employee handbook and helps workers file discrimination complaints.***

Still, workers continue to report that they face racial bias from frontline managers and other similar problems. Ablavsky says CAAMWU’s practice of documenting incidents carefully and comparing them against past manager behavior helps the union put pressure on Cummins, for instance, to discipline a manager who shows bias against African-Americans. “It’s a useful way of highlighting when disparate treatment is occurring,” she explains.

Cummins management has in the past taken action to try to silence or squelch the union. Though the union has published a newsletter, the *Unity News*, around eight times a year since

1992, management has fought to stop its distribution. In 1994, Cummins’ management began harassing and threatening union members for distributing *Unity News* at the plant. CAAMWU pressed charges at the NLRB and in federal court; the company kept appealing, and the union kept winning. Finally, in 2003, two years after a unanimous decision by the 4th Circuit Federal Court of Appeals, holding that the union could distribute *Unity News*, management confiscated the newsletter again. This meant Cummins could be found in contempt of court, so now it must provide bins inside the plant marked “Union Literature” for free distribution of the newsletter. In addition, the workers are free to hand out the *Unity News* in non-work areas on non-work time. “This was a major victory for the union and established the *Unity News* as a regular part of life in the plant,” the union said later in a press statement.

## The Few Leading the Many

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, workers at factories throughout Eastern North Carolina experienced a cluster of grueling union drives. Each closely fought drive resulted in a loss for the union. Seeing both the heartbreak of these losses and the tenacity of the workers inside the plants, CAAMWU activists made the strategic decision to, as Wrenn puts it, “organize the minority to win the majority” at Cummins.

Though they lack a majority, CAAMWU activists use petition drives, letters of support from local church and political leaders, and sticker days to demonstrate to management that the workers and their communities support the changes that CAAMWU demands. “We have a much wider base of support than we do dues-paying members,” Wrenn explains. (Wrenn added that while the union does not make its membership numbers public, the UE requires its unions to have at least fifty dues-paying members—and CAAMWU has more than that now.)

CAAMWU deliberately avoids a more confrontational approach that could result in lockouts or strikes—conflicts that could pose an existential threat to a non-majority union. Drawing together community and shop-floor support with management accountability

strengthens the internal networks among workers inside the plant. This, says Wrenn, has led to steady union growth.

***CAAMWU deliberately avoids a more confrontational approach that could result in lockouts or strikes.***

The recent wage victory rested on this strategy. When the company decided in 2013 to give skilled workers a 75-cent raise but nothing to the production and operations technicians, the union acted. CAAMWU activists put together a petition to Cummins executives demanding a raise for all 1,000 Cummins employees in the RMEP; hundreds of workers also wore stickers saying “RMEP Workers Want Fairness.” When Cummins executives came to tour the plant, the union was waiting for them; even the skilled trades workers who had gotten raises let the executives know it was unfair to deny raises to the technicians.

Likewise, CAAMWU is trying to bring the temp and subcontracted workers’ wages into parity with those of the Cummins employees. The temp and subcontracted workers who inspect the engine blocks and pack them for shipment start at just \$7.50 per hour, says Wrenn. Subcontracted housekeepers and paint crew mostly make \$10 per hour or less. Temp workers who make subassembly parts for the assembly line make \$9. Meanwhile, actual Cummins employees on the assembly line start at \$13.19 per hour, with the skilled trades (such as machinists) making more than that. “There should be no excuses for people making less than \$10 an hour,” says Wrenn.

Ablavsky points out that the grassroots community origins of CAAMWU give it staying power in an anti-union state. CAAMWU’s deep history in the community, Ablavsky says, “explains why they’ve been so resilient. It really grew out of their own organizing, and didn’t stem from a national union’s grand plan to revive the labor movement.”

Indeed, “grand plans” to rebuild labor’s power have usually failed in this part of the country. The post-war period of the late 1940s,

the Southern manufacturing boom of the late 1970s, the 1980s and 1990s factories in Eastern North Carolina mentioned above, and, in 2013, the new Volkswagen assembly plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee—all these periods witnessed high-profile union organizing drives that went bust. Many of these efforts were the result of strategic decisions taken by top union brass, as opposed to originating within the workers’ local communities. What is more, even though a determined minority of pro-union workers may have existed within these facilities, unions such as the United Auto Workers (UAW) did not support the formation of non-majority unions inside the factories. But the success of CAAMWU’s non-majority strategy demonstrates that maybe they should have tried—instead of abandoning the workers who did support the union to an uncertain fate.

Outside of the manufacturing sector, other non-majority unions have made strides in North Carolina. The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) organizes tobacco and other harvest workers in the state and has partnered in recent years with the IAMAW (Machinists’ union) to support these workers’ union activities without a majority. And, after nearly two decades of non-majority shop-floor organizing, five thousand meatpacking workers at Smithfield Foods in Tar Heel were able in 2009 to survive immigration raids and other vicious Smithfield tactics to finally win a majority union election and a first contract.

The win at Smithfield demonstrates the long-term, work-in-progress nature of non-majority union organizing. But here, there is also an echo of past times. The example of CAAMWU’s long-running work inside the Rocky Mount Cummins plant is reminiscent of the pre-Wagner Act 1920s and 1930s, when there were no union elections and no binding contracts—only issues and workers acting in concert to demand fairness. Just as many unionists of those days did, Wrenn and his fellow union members carried on, hoping to get what many American workers ironically now consider to be a benefit of labor’s heyday: a union contract. “One day we will have a contract and a majority,” says Wrenn. “In the meantime, we believe in organizing. Someone talked at our

last Martin Luther King Day about fighting with a sword and a shield. The shield is the contract—but we've still got a sword."

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Notes**

1. SEC Filing statement 10-Q, September 28, 2014, available at <http://markets.on.nytimes.com/research/stocks/fundamentals/drawFiling.asp?docKey=137-000002617214000034-32DJVVFCC528QJ7K26DUVTEUA5&docFormat=HTM&formType=10-Q>.

2. "Cummins shares could rise as much as 15 pct over next yr-Barron's," November 16, 2014, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/17/cummins-idUSL2N0T700E20141117?type=companyNews>.
3. According to the *New York Times* business pages: "Analysis Tools," available at <http://markets.on.nytimes.com/research/stocks/fundamentals.asp?symbol=CMI>.
4. Jim Wrenn, "UE 'Non-Majority' Union Organizes the Old-Fashioned Way," *Labor Notes*, July 31, 2002, available at <http://www.labornotes.org/2002/07/ue-non-majority-union-organizes-old-fashioned-way>.

### **Author Biography**

**Mariya Strauss** is a writer based in Baltimore.