

Organizers Gather to Fight Poverty

Written by Administrator

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August 9, 2009 By [Davin White](#) Charleston Gazette Staff writer

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- John Wessel-McCoy likens the effort needed to pull millions of people out of poverty to the 19th century's fight to abolish slavery and the coalfield battles in rural West Virginia in the 1920s.

Better conditions would not have been possible unless the coal miners were at the "forefront of that struggle to get ahead," he said. Likewise, the poor need to be at the front of a new worldwide social movement to end world poverty, he said.

Wessel-McCoy, a student at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City and a member of the seminary's Poverty Initiative, will join about 160 other community and religious leaders from around the world at a weeklong leadership school at Camp Virgil Tate.

The Poverty Initiative is sponsoring the school, which is hosted locally by the [Direct Action Welfare Group](#), a statewide organization composed of people who receive public assistance, work low-wage jobs or live in poverty.

The global economic crisis has pushed more people into poverty, as the concentration of wealth is more exclusive, Wessel-McCoy said. He and his wife, Colleen, say the Policy Initiative's goal is to build a coalition and change the direction we're heading. "It's not necessarily happening yet," she said.

The couple joined with domestic workers, restaurant workers, faith-based leaders, local advocates and others to weigh strategies to build the coalition

.Angelica Hernandez, a member of the New York-based organization [Domestic Workers United](#), said it is important that women's leadership be part of the weeklong school. The group is comprised of

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nannies, housekeepers and elderly caregivers in the New York City metropolitan area. "As domestic workers, our labor is invisible," she said in Spanish.

Priscilla Gonzalez, also with Domestic Workers United, translated. "The majority of us are heads of household, so we know firsthand what poverty is," Hernandez said.

Joycelyn Gill-Campbell, an organizer with Domestic Workers United, said the group is working toward a statewide domestic workers' bill of rights.

New York Gov. David Paterson has pledged his support, she said. The bill of rights goes beyond fair labor practices to include basic respect and an end to exploitation, she said.

"The work of domestic workers is very difficult because there's a lot of abuse -- even sexual and physical abuse," Hernandez said.

William Cerf, also of New York, works with the Restaurant Opportunity Center of New York, whose goal is to fight discrimination and poor treatment of restaurant workers such as dishwashers and food preparers.

Donna Barrowcliffe is taking ideas from the leadership school back to the Church of Scotland. A resident of Glasgow, she said the city has high rates of smoking, drinking and drug abuse and the church is trying to reach people who live in poverty through new means, such as Internet media.

Locally, Beth Dortch of the Teen Direct Action Welfare Group said she wants to attend a media workshop this week so she can develop online video compilations, dubbed "My Life," where teens will interview people in their community and share their own stories of struggling with poverty

.On Thursday at 5:30 p.m., the Direct Action Welfare Group will welcome the public to a picnic with food and entertainment, said Evelyn Dortch, the group's executive director.

For those interested in donating or volunteering, contact the Direct Action Welfare Group at 304-720-0260

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