



Durham Workers' Rights Commission August 26, 2025

Location: Durham City Hall

In Attendance: Chair Ballan, Vice Chair Reinstein, Commissioner Luster, Commissioner Fenerty, Commissioner Medelius, Commissioner Taylor, Commissioner Morell, Commissioner Spates, Commissioner Wang

Agenda Items:

CALL TO ORDER: 6:02 PM

MINUTES/OLD BUSINESS:

6:04 minutes from the last meeting approved.

PUBLIC COMMENTS:

1. Mika Murphy, local D.S.A. and Durham Workers Assembly informs the Commission of upcoming Labor Day events and advocates for building a social base of unity in this city, as many efforts are currently siloed.
 - a. On building a solidarity and a social base, Murphy offers a few action items to the Durham Workers Rights Commission: (1) the DWRC could work to disseminate knowledge and training to improve worker connection throughout Durham (via our education committee), (2) the DWRC could offer a venue to labor organizations.
 - b. On building up Durham as a hub for labor unionization, Murphy touches on the importance of fostering (1) a militant culture in labor organizing (2) an open culture across organizations and unions.
 - c. Durham is a critical epicenter for the labor struggle in North Carolina, and having the City of Durham (via the DWRC) support organizing efforts is key to improving our working conditions in this state. The DWRC and the City will need to build trust with community and unions in order to make these improvements.
2. Commissioner Wang announces that Duke Grad students won their contract and will be voting next week on acceptance of the contract.

NEW BUSINESS:

1. Commissioner Medelius announces that the 4th Amendment Resolution will be on the agenda items for the next City Council meeting on Tuesday, September 2nd at 7pm and that it has already garnered wide support and is expected to pass. Medelius also updates the Commission on the confluence of a few of Durham City's boards, committees, and

commissions (Racial Equity, Human Relations, Hispanic Latino Committee, etc.). By coming together, we can share issues with liaisons and ask to be treated equally.

2. The Research Committee brings a few questions to the Commission about collecting employee working conditions information. The Commission touched on the feasibility of coding our own website to host the survey, the scope of what the survey will actually cover, and digging into what kind of utilities we already have at our disposal.
 - a. The Durham Worker Bill of Rights (which was written by the DWRC and passed by Council in 2019) would be a good place to start our survey or alternatively, for our recommendations on what workplace conditions should be met.
 - b. Perhaps instead of a survey, we should instead be working towards workplace standards and some kind of endorsement system for a workplace, once those standards are met or exceeded.
 - i. Unions themselves could also endorse the workplace standards accreditation. (However, we should be weary of a pitfall wherein the unions would have to take over the task of bringing a workplace up to the workplace standards, instead of the employer being in charge of meeting these standards.)
 - ii. Having a workplace standards “accreditation” system would encourage good behavior via social pressure, but could not actually enforce any standards (due to North Carolina state preemption over our municipalities) Because Durhamites really care about workers, we should leverage this social pressure and employers will have to follow.
 - iii. We could employ a window sticker as proof that workplace standards are met. If the stickers are displayed if the employer is found to be failing any of the standards, we can establish a hotline or form to speak on any non-compliance.
 - iv. Employees could nominate their workplace to the workplace standards accreditation system.
 - v. This should be binary—they either do or don’t make the commitment and meet the workplace standards.
 - vi. These standards will encourage businesses to reflect on their own practices.
 - c. We should leverage the strength, support, and education that unions in Durham can offer and talk to organizers about the standards that we should include.
3. Nate Baker introduces Frank Satera of Democracy at Work Institute (a federation of worker cooperatives that advocates for employee stock ownership programs and worker coops). Baker emphasizes the importance of worker ownership.
4. Frank Satera addresses the Commission and introduces Democracy at Work Institute’s project. They are trying to demonstrate, enable, and embed worker cooperatives by working with cities and their local governments and businesses to expand worker ownership to communities locked out of better jobs.
 - a. DAWI aim to build worker equity through Worker Ownership Cities Program, which they are initiating in Raleigh. They hope to also work with Durham. To be successful, the project has 3 pillars that they rely upon: DAWI, a local partner (NC Employee ownership center), and the city itself (Clear and concise support from the mayor and city).
 - b. The approach is bottom-up and grassroots simultaneously.

- c. Average time of engagement: 19 months in order to build a worker ownership city
5. Ilah Burbank, of the NC Ownership Center non-profit (NC OC) talks about their role in this endeavor to bring worker cooperatives to North Carolina. NC OC offers education for owners, attorneys, and shareholders who are interested in learning about alternative ownership models. Ilah covers Employee Stock Ownership Plans, Employee Ownership Trusts, and Worker Cooperatives.
 6. Frank Satera speaks on the efficacy of worker cooperatives, which offer higher wages for the median worker, higher job satisfaction amongst worker owners, better chances at survival in the market, a 150x decrease in worker wage discrepancy (between highest and lowest paid workers), higher productivity, decreased attrition, and an increased sense of meaning in work.
 - a. Satera touches on the Union-Coop Model, wherein the Cooperatively owned business employees are still encouraged to unionize (not all workers will be owners, but all workers are encouraged to join the union.)
 - b. Existing unions can also support the development of the business into a worker owned cooperative
 7. DAWI will be conferring with Council on August 27 to see if Durham could also become one of DAWI's cities.
 8. Question from Mika Murphy about banks' willingness to sell to a worker cooperative model (in transferring debt from owner to coop). Satera answers that there are 5 FDIC banks that specialize in this process of transferring debt and ownership from an owners/shareholders to a worker cooperative. These specialty lenders are interested in this transaction because the profitability of the worker cooperative is the guarantor on the loan (instead of an individual person, which can actually be more dicey).
 9. The Commission asks for good examples of governance within the worker cooperative board, to which Murphy responds that the difference between good and bad governance really relies on healthy democracy within the cooperative.
 10. The Commission asks about how worker cooperative businesses allow for undocumented workers. Murphy explains that the LLC is the entity for the business, and LLCs routinely hire people without documentation. Murphy gives examples of worker cooperative ownership in the construction world.

OPEN COMMENTS:

1. Mika Murphy asks Commission (1) to consider offering use of City facilities to unions and organizers, (2) to consider how the commission can facilitate building solidarity amongst organizations and unions, (3) to look into Downtown Durham Inc., and finally (4) to liaise with the Transportation Committee regarding public works that get passed but not funded, regarding busses (especially within the context of our Discover Durham getting \$4 million of funding in this year's approved budget).

Meeting Adjourned at 7:28 pm

Next meeting: In-person, on September 30th, at 6pm at City Hall

Respectfully Submitted by: DWC Commissioner Morell

Recorded by: Ashlee M Adams, Assistant City Clerk