

Building the Interfaith Worker Justice Movement: Kim Bobo's Story

Joseph A. McCartin

Kimberley A. Bobo is arguably the foremost organizer working on the religious left in the United States today. Since 1996, she has guided Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ), the largest and most influential organization of labor-minded religious activists to have emerged since the heyday of the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU) in the 1930s and 1940s. Unlike the ACTU, however, Bobo's organization is ecumenical and includes Jews, Muslims, Catholics, evangelical and mainline Protestants, and others in its ranks. Also unlike the ACTU, it is also based in the nation's communities of faith, rather than in the unions themselves. IWJ is a grassroots movement, which now includes more than sixty affiliates, such as the Massachusetts Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice and the Los Angeles-based Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice. For more than ten years now, it has been building alliances with organized labor while also speaking out on behalf of unorganized workers, whom the labor movement has yet to mobilize. Its success has been such that the *Wall Street Journal* recently saw fit to run an attack on the organization for its tendency to "ignore the evidence that much poverty in prosperous, opportunity-rich America results from dysfunctional — dare one call it 'sinful'? — behavior."¹

Despite such attacks, the IWJ's influence continues to grow. Certainly, much of its success can be attributed to Kim Bobo, its founder and chief organizer. The story of how Bobo came to found the organization divulges a great deal about the potential power that is currently bottled up in America's religious communities.

Kim Bobo grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, with no direct connection to the labor movement. Her father was an engineer with General Electric, her mother a homemaker. Both of her parents had been the first generation in their families to attend college. "They were both out of fairly poor families," she explains, "my mom out of eastern Kentucky and my dad's family out of dirt farmers in Texas. There was

For more information on Interfaith Worker Justice, go to www.iwj.org.

1. Steven Malanga, "The Rise of the Religious Left," *Wall Street Journal*, October 16, 2007, A21.

no real great wealth there or anything. But neither were they in the labor movement *per se*.”²

But if Kim was raised with little direct knowledge of the labor movement, she was imbued from an early age with values that would ultimately lead her to take up the cause of working people struggling for justice. She cites two key influences in her upbringing. The first came from parents who knew life’s struggles firsthand. Kim’s father was considered a poor student because of an untreated speech impediment. Had it not been for his service in World War II—during which he sought a job as a medic so that he would not have to use a weapon—his mathematical talents would not have been discovered. As it was, he was able to attend college on the GI Bill after the war and take up a career as an engineer and inventor that he never would have dreamed of as a child. In part as a result of his experiences, Kim’s father was “very intentional about encouraging” her to believe that “if I wanted to do something I could do it.”

The second vital influence came from the Bobo family’s deep religious devotion. Her family life revolved around the Church of Christ, and her father served as an elder in her Cincinnati church. “Not the United Church of Christ,” Kim points out, “but the Church of Christ that’s the more fundamentalist, that doesn’t believe in instruments in worship.” Religious devotion deeply colored her formative years, growing up in Cincinnati in the 1960s. “I went to church Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night, every week of my childhood,” she remembers. Like any good member of her denomination, Kim worked hard to master the Bible, memorizing its verses. But from an early age, her family also taught her how to put the biblical injunction to take care of the least of these into action. Kim recalls that she often accompanied her father on “bus station runs.” “People would come up from eastern Kentucky, they would get to Cincinnati on their way to Detroit for jobs and they would run out of money and they would call the church,” she remembers. “And my dad would take me and we would do bus station runs.”

Bobo’s worldview was deeply shaped by her church life—so deeply that when it came time for her to attend college in 1972, she explains, “It never occurred to me that I would go anywhere but the Church of Christ college in Nashville, Tennessee, called David Lipscomb College, so I just applied there and went there.” But as nurtured as she was in the Church of Christ tradition, Bobo was attracted by the ecumenical impulses that were reshaping American religion in the early 1970s, as peace activists came together in ecumenical organizations like Clergy and Laity Concerned, as the National Council of Churches took a lead in the civil rights struggle, and as musicals like “Godspell” inspired young believers across denominational lines. In such an environment, Bobo found Lipscomb an unexpectedly “rigid place” and decided to leave the school. After working for a year in an actuarial department, she won admission in 1974 to Barnard College in Manhattan as a religion major. “There

2. This and all subsequent quotations come from my interview with Kim Bobo, conducted in Washington, D.C., on December 13, 2007 (tape in the possession of the author).

were people at the church who really warned my parents that, you know, 'if she goes to Barnard she will lose her faith,'" Kim recalls. But Kim's parents supported her decision, and once she arrived at Barnard her life took some unexpected turns.

Three crucial things happened to Bobo at Barnard in the mid-1970s. First, she began to reach beyond her Church of Christ roots, encountering a broad range of people of faith who helped shape the commitment to social justice that the prophets and her father's bus station runs had helped instill in her years before. At nearby Union Theological Seminary, she had an opportunity to take a course with the visiting Catholic theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, whose 1973 book *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* had made him the most famous spokesperson for the liberation theology movement that spread across Latin America in the 1970s.³ "Working with people of other faith traditions that you saw at Barnard was great for me," Bobo later explained. She grew to "love understanding the varieties of religious expression," she recalls, and to appreciate "the commonality of our core concern for poverty and injustice" that united people of many faiths.

Second, while at Barnard, Bobo befriended a charismatic Morningside Heights tenant organizer named Marie Runyon who modeled the sort of activist life to which Bobo felt increasingly drawn. Runyon had moved to New York from North Carolina in the 1940s, after attending Berea College. Following a divorce that left her alone raising a toddler, Runyon took a job as a membership clerk with the American Civil Liberties Union. Runyon had reluctantly become an activist herself in 1961, when Columbia University purchased the building in which she had rented an apartment since 1955. When Columbia told the tenants of 130 Morningside Drive that it was time to move, most of them complied. Runyon, however, began forging the stragglers into a militant tenants' organization. "They said move out," Runyon later recalled, and we said, "Go to Hell." Thus ensued an incredible forty-year struggle between the university and Runyon that did not end until 2002, when Columbia called a truce, gave up plans to develop the ground on which Runyon's building stood and decided to name 130 Morningside Drive "Marie Runyon Court." During the 1960s and 1970s, Runyon became a symbol of neighborhood resistance against Columbia's expansion. Bobo met Runyon in her heyday in the mid-1970s, when Runyon was serving a term in the New York State Assembly, representing Morningside Heights, and busy launching an organization called the Harlem Restoration Project.⁴ Yet it was only partly Runyon's activism that drew Bobo's attention. More practically, Bobo had heard that Runyon was "looking for some student concerned about social justice whom she could provide free rent to in exchange for walking her dog," Bobo recalled years later. "What a deal, right?," Bobo laughed. Thus Kim Bobo met the woman who became her "first real mentor," someone whom she would later credit with teaching her that "you could actually have a career in social justice."

3. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

4. Clyde Haberman, "Tenant Rebel Accepts Peace and an Honor," *New York Times*, December 6, 2002; Mary Billard, "Activists Afterward," *New York Times*, April 2, 2000.

It was Runyon who introduced Bobo to direct action on one memorable afternoon when the housing activist received a call about a tenant about to be evicted. “Come on down with me Kim, let’s go stop this,” Runyon drawled. When they got to the apartment building where the eviction was under way, Runyon left Bobo in charge of the street. “Here Kim, stand in front of this truck and look big. I’m going to go up to the apartment,” she instructed. Not being a very large woman, Bobo was skeptical. “How do I look big?” As Runyon rushed up the stairs, she called over her shoulder: “Stand akimbo and just don’t let ’em move.” The police soon arrived, and Kim Bobo experienced her first arrest. It was not her last. Her association with Runyon not only provided Bobo with “incredibly great training in terms of some practical things,” such as how to keep her poise in confrontations, but also gave her “a vision of . . . doing the work for the long haul.”

At Barnard, Bobo also made a third crucial connection. She joined a budding organization called Bread for the World (BFW). BFW grew out of a meeting organized by Protestant and Catholic activists in New York City in October 1972. The activists were led by Rev. Arthur Simon, a Missouri Synod Lutheran and brother of the late Senator Paul Simon (D-IL), the pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church on New York’s Lower East Side in the 1960s and early 1970s. Simon and his colleagues were determined to push politicians to confront the causes of hunger. By 1974, just as Kim Bobo was settling in at Barnard, BFW began its first recruiting efforts, reaching out to Christians of all denominations behind the slogan, “Have Faith. End Hunger.”⁵ The organization’s fusion of social justice and religious faith appealed to Bobo, and she joined it as an undergraduate. Even before she had graduated, Bobo helped organize a network of hunger groups in New England, an experience that she later credited with providing her “introduction to organizing in terms of social justice.”

After graduating from Barnard, Bobo was still unsure about what she wanted to do with her life. As a result of an insurance settlement stemming from an auto accident in which a car she was driving was hit by a drunk driver in Cincinnati, Bobo was able to finance a trip across Asia. That trip clarified things for her and steeled her in her resolve to devote herself to a life of social action on behalf of the poor. “You can’t climb over people living in the streets of Calcutta and not have it influence how you think of yourself,” she later explained. Her Bible training had taught Bobo nothing if not the lesson of Jesus’ parable of the talents: from those to whom much is given, much will be expected. Upon her return, she offered her services to BFW and the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility.

BFW quickly made Bobo a job offer, and she set to work first as a part-time staffer and then as a full-time organizer in 1978. Twenty-three years old at the time, Bobo was put in charge of organizing in ten states in the Southeast and building local chapters of BFW in every congressional district in the region. “I felt like I was

5. Arthur R. Simon, *Bread for the World* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975); David Beckmann and Richard A. Hoehn, *Transforming the Politics of Hunger* (Washington, DC: Bread for the World Institute on Hunger and Development, 1992); [Kimberley A. Bobo] *World Food/Hunger Studies* (New York: Transnational University Program, Institute for World Order, 1977).

the apostle Paul, and I went from little town to little town," she now says. "We'd have three members in Alabama's second district and I would call them up and I would go to meet with them and I would see if I could form a chapter." As Bobo traveled the region over the next few years, she made extensive contacts with church communities, helped launch roughly sixty chapters of BFW, and established phone trees that could quickly disseminate information and coordinate members' grassroots lobbying on hunger-related issues. She was so successful at the work that she was soon made BFW's national director of organizing. By the time Bobo left BFW in 1987, she had overseen the growth of the organization from humble beginnings to fifty thousand members organized into 350 local chapters, able to mobilize its grassroots "telephone-tree" lobbyists in nearly 400 of the nation's 435 congressional districts.

Her years with BFW taught Bobo many lessons. Building on her experiences at Barnard, she "learned how to appreciate the different ways that people talk about their faith, the different ways people practice their faith, and . . . how to focus on what unites us and not what divides us," she explains. She also learned an essential truth about organizing, that "there's always people who won't do things," and "you can either get mad about those, or you can go around them and keep moving, focus on finding the people who are willing to do stuff, and build upon them." In the process of learning that lesson, Bobo also came to see through "a myth that's out there," she explains, a myth that holds that people don't want "to be engaged in more structural kinds of questions" and that they "just want to do charity." Based upon her experiences building BFW, she concluded this was not true. "I think that people get that doing soup kitchens and shelters is not enough," she argues. What people lacked, she came to believe, was simply a practical way to tackle the bigger structural problems.

Bobo was grateful for her years at BFW. Her work there led her to come to "think of myself as an organizer," she now says. After nearly ten years in the field, she had begun to think more systematically about organizing work, and in 1986 she wrote her first book on the craft.⁶ Her work at BFW had also introduced her to her husband, Stephen Coats, who had dropped out of Yale Divinity School to join the staff of BFW. (Coats is now director of the U.S. Labor Education in the Americas [US-LEAP] project, which builds solidarity with Latin American workers trying to organize U.S.-based employers.⁷) But by 1986, Bobo was reaching a parting of the ways with BFW's founder Art Simon. The organization had hit a plateau of fifty thousand members, and Bobo believed that it was time to implement an aggressive organizing strategy, including door-to-door canvassing, that could enlarge the organization's base. Simon believed that this would change the nature of the organization in ways that he opposed. When Bobo found support for some of her ideas among BFW's board members, Simon asked for her resignation. Bobo came to see

6. Kimberley A. Bobo, *Lives Matter: A Handbook for Christian Organizing* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1986).

7. On US-LEAP, see www.usleap.org.

her departure from BFW as a blessing in disguise. “Life is too short to waste it on things that don’t make a difference,” she often says.

After leaving BFW in 1987, Bobo took a job as an organizer trainer with the Midwest Academy in Chicago. Founded in 1973 by Heather Booth from the proceeds of a back-pay award in an unfair labor practice suit, the Midwest Academy had emerged in the 1970s as one of the leading centers of the “backyard revolution” of community organizing. Booth, the academy’s visionary organizing trainer, Steve Max, and its energetic director, Jackie Kendall, trained a generation of grassroots organizers. Nonetheless, fifteen years after its founding, the Midwest Academy had yet to make significant inroads into the nation’s religious communities in the way the older and more well-established Industrial Areas Foundation, established by the legendary Saul Alinsky, had done.⁸ The academy was looking for an organizing trainer attuned to the religious community who could help it build its work among church groups. At the same time, Kim Bobo was looking for a place to hone her organizing skills. It was a natural match. “They hired me on, and I was going to be like the ‘Church Lady,’ right?” Bobo laughs. “I was the lady that had kind of a different experience . . . and I would be able to expand their work . . . with the religious community. So I was the church lady hired at the Midwest Academy.”

Before joining the Midwest Academy in 1987, Kim Bobo had had few encounters with labor unions. “I sort of heard about labor,” she chuckles, “but I really didn’t work with labor.” That soon began to change. “Because the academy had a long connection with the labor movement,” Bobo explains, “I was often involved in training with labor about looking for partnerships, and so I kept suggesting working with the religious community and [labor] people would look at me like, ‘What planet are you from, lady?’” Bobo made little headway in trying to foster labor-religious partnerships in her first two years at the academy. But an opportunity arose in 1989 when a delegation from the United Mine Workers (UMW) made a presentation about the Pittston strike to a Midwest Academy organizing conference. “I was just appalled,” Bobo recalls. After the presentation, Bobo approached Ken Zinn, one of the UMW representatives. “Well, Ken, what’s the religious community doing on this strike?” she asked. “How would you feel if I put together a national religious support committee to help the strike?” As she recalls, Zinn told her, “Well, lady, you just go right ahead.” He seemed not to expect much from the academy’s “church lady.”⁹

Zinn obviously did not realize his good fortune, for, thanks to her years at BFW, Kim Bobo had more extensive connections among the nation’s religious social justice activists than the labor crowd ever dreamed of developing. Bobo quickly called upon her old contacts to build a support committee for the Pittston strikers. But as soon as she made her first phone calls, she realized that she was facing a big-

8. Harry C. Boyte, *The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Harry C. Boyte, Heather Booth, and Steve Max, *Citizen Action and the New American Populism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

9. Ken Zinn currently serves as director of the AFL-CIO Center for Strategic Research.

ger challenge than she anticipated. Bobo called her contacts at the leading national religious denominations expecting that she would quickly locate helpful people in their offices. "All the denominations had hunger staff people," she knew from her days at BFW, and she had done enough low-income housing work at the Midwest Academy to know that "most of them had housing staff," so she "just assumed that all the denominations had labor staff" and all she had to do "was just find them." "So I proceeded to call all of the major national denominations and say 'Could I speak to your labor staff person?'" she recalls. "Well, it was a very short conversation, because they didn't have any. Honestly, I was really shocked. I just had no idea. So I said 'Okay, if not a labor staff person, who deals with your questions of economic justice?'" Again, no one." Bobo was astonished to learn that "there really weren't people in the structures working on issues of jobs and the economy, or inequality." Lacking such people, Bobo resolved to assemble from scratch a national religious support network for the Pittston strikers. She organized religious delegations to meet with Pittston board members, drafted a national religious sign-on letter and began to build a network. "I got acquainted with a bunch of people who were interested in this stuff in many places around the country," she explains. Her work paid off. When the Pittston strikers prevailed in 1990, labor officials expressed their gratitude to Bobo and invited her to Washington to explain how she had built her support group. Bobo was surprised to find that labor leaders acted as though "I had done something really profound and I knew I hadn't. I'd just done your basic religious organizing." "I just kind of asked people," she said. "It wasn't that hard."¹⁰

The Pittston strike gave Bobo an opportunity to reach out to religious leaders around the country at a time when she was gaining stature as an organizer. In 1991, she collaborated with Steve Max and Jackie Kendall of the Midwest Academy on the book *Organizing for Social Change: A Manual for Activists in the 1990's*.¹¹ Now she began to look for a way to translate her work on the Pittston strike into ongoing organizing around labor issues in the religious community. Because she still served on the staff of the Midwest Academy, she knew that she did not have the time to build a national network. So she decided to focus on Chicago. She called upon three Chicago-area religious leaders whom she knew she could count on to help her: Msgr. John J. Egan, a one-time associate of Saul Alinsky who had long been the leader of Catholic social activism in the city; United Methodist Bishop Jesse DeWitt, a leader in Chicago's African American religious community; and Rabbi Robert J. Marx, founder of Congregation Hakafa in the Chicago suburb of Glencoe and founder and past president of the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, who had marched with

10. For background on the Pittston Strike, see Richard A. Brisbin Jr., *A Strike Like No Other Strike: Law and Resistance during the Pittston Coal Strike of 1989–1990* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Michael D. Yates, "From the Coal Wars to the Pittston Strike," *Monthly Review* 42:2 (June 1990): 25–39; Karen Beckwith, "Collective Identities of Class and Gender: Working-Class Women in the Pittston Coal Strike," *Political Psychology* 19, no. 1 (1998): 147–67.

11. Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall, and Steve Max, *Organizing for Social Change: A Manual for Activists in the 1990's* (Washington, DC: Seven Locks Press, 1991).

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during his 1966 Chicago campaign.¹² Egan, DeWitt, and Marx had talked among themselves for years about the need for a labor-religious coalition in Chicago, but none of them were in a position to devote the time and energy necessary to build it. “But you know I was this fresh organizer type,” explains Bobo. With a little digging, Bobo uncovered several other Chicago religious leaders who were interested in building a religious-labor alliance, including Rev. Michael Rouse, an AME Zion pastor; Rev. Jim Reed, a United Methodist pastor; and Fr. Tom Joyce, a Catholic priest. Together Bobo and her allies in the religious community began building the Chicago Interfaith Committee on Worker Issues. Within months, they had recruited a steering committee of more than two dozen people in the labor and religious communities.

Between 1991 and 1995, Bobo organized the Chicago Interfaith Committee on Worker Issues in what little “spare time” she managed from her work at the Midwest Academy. During these years she also found a mentor in the Chicago labor movement. Don Turner, vice president of the Chicago Teachers Union, who served in succession as assistant to the president, secretary-treasurer, and finally president of the Chicago Federation of Labor in the early 1990’s, became Bobo’s guide to the world of Chicago labor. “Don was truly a mentor to me in terms of understanding how to work effectively with the labor movement,” Bobo notes. When she began her work, she admits that she had little sense of what she calls “the union protocol thing.” She was initially confused to find that Chicago labor leaders were not necessarily “jumping up and down that we had this group,” but Bobo soon learned that she had to win the trust of union officials if she was going to get anywhere. Turner would tell her, “Look, Kim, as important as it is to work with organizers, you’ve got to work with the elected leaders as well. If you don’t have their blessing, you should not be working with an organizer.” Or he would say, “Oh, Kim, you don’t want to get involved in this campaign, this one’s not going anywhere.” These were things that Bobo says she “would not necessarily have known on my own.” As she learned the ropes of Chicago land labor, Bobo’s work attracted a following.

No sooner had Bobo launched her organization than she felt pulled into struggles beyond Chicago. In 1992, her group organized support for the striking Caterpillar workers in Decatur, Illinois.¹³ Thereafter, Bobo started to get calls from Detroit and Milwaukee asking “How do we get one of those groups in our town?” All the while, Bobo juggled the demands of the religious-labor organizing with her Midwest Academy work, staffing the Chicago committee at first on her own, then with the help of Lutheran Volunteer Corps interns.

12. On Egan’s life and work, see Margery Frisbie, *An Alley in Chicago: The Ministry of a City Priest* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1991). Rabbi Marx was the author of an influential essay that circulated among activists in 1968 called “The People in Between,” which reiterated the historic Jewish commitment to social justice in the context of the upheavals of the 1960s. See Robert J. Marx, “The People in Between,” April 13, 1968, www.jcua.org/site/DocServer/6047The_People_in_Between.pdf?docID=203 (accessed January 27, 2008).

13. “Religious Leaders Urge Caterpillar against Permanent Replacement of Striking Workers,” *U.S. Newswire*, April 8, 1992.

By 1995, it was clear to Bobo that the time might be right to see if the coalition building she had done in Chicago might fly on a national level. A maternity leave that she took after the birth of her twin sons allowed Bobo to think about how she wanted to spend the rest of her working life. A subsequent job offer to run the Chicago Rehab Network, which Bobo ultimately turned down, helped crystallize her thinking: she was ready to use the leadership skills she had acquired in nearly twenty years of organizing toward building something new. The election of John Sweeney as president of the AFL-CIO in 1995 in turn convinced her that the time might be right to launch an aggressive national labor-religious network, building on the work she had done in Chicago. "It so felt like it was *the moment* to do something related to the labor movement," she recalls. With the encouragement of both her husband and Jackie Kendall of the Midwest Academy, Bobo went on a part-time basis at the academy and began drafting plans to transform the Chicago network into a national organization.

With the support of Jackie Kendall and the advice of her Chicago stalwarts, Msgr. Egan, Rev. DeWitt, and Rabbi Marx, Bobo completed a vision paper for a national religious-based worker justice movement in December 1995. Her plan was ready just as the Sweeney administration was settling in to run the AFL-CIO. Among Sweeney's announced priorities was organizing new workers and building alliances with allies outside of labor's ranks, creating a perfect opening for Bobo's plan. Msgr. Egan used his connections to Sweeney to secure a meeting for Bobo with AFL-CIO leaders in Washington, and out of that meeting Sweeney assigned his aide Gerry Shea to serve as labor's liaison to Bobo's effort.

It took a little more work for Bobo to enlist the enthusiasm of the nation's most influential labor priest, Msgr. George G. Higgins. Higgins had at first been skeptical of efforts to build a national labor-religious alliance, having seen previous efforts to launch such endeavors amount to little more than an inaugural press conference and an impressive list of letter signers who lent their names but not their time to organizational work.¹⁴ But Higgins soon realized that Bobo had something different in mind, for she intended not merely to pull together labor and religious leaders onto a national committee but to organize religious communities at the grassroots level. Indeed, Higgins soon came to believe that Bobo was better prepared than anyone in the country to carry on and expand his own life's work of labor-religious coalition building. A close bond between the two developed over time. "I loved George," Bobo explains.

According to Bobo, Higgins impressed upon her four essential lessons. First, Higgins argued that "our job is to build the partnerships on the things that unify us, and not to be critical of the labor movement. They've got enough of that." Second, Higgins believed "that you've got to have really strong personal relationships"

14. Msgr. George G. Higgins, interview by the author, Washington, DC, July 21, 1998 (tape in possession of the author). See also John J. O'Brien, *George G. Higgins and the Quest for Worker Justice: The Evolution of Catholic Social Thought in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).

to build effective alliances. And third, “you’ve got to engage people in real things, and frankly not be critical of those in the religious community when they can’t do things.” Finally, Higgins fully supported Bobo’s vision of grassroots organizing, trying to “build structures that help people be involved.”

Having laid the groundwork for a national organization, Bobo set about building her board in early 1996. “I literally got on the phone and started calling people: Would you be willing to be on the board?” Bobo was upfront about the commitment she required. “I don’t have a penny to pay you to come to meetings; you are going to have to pay your own way to come to meetings. I’m going to make you work hard. But it’s really going to be terrific, so will you come?” She found a vast untapped interest among the religious leaders she contacted. She began to find allies far beyond Chicago, such as Rev. Nelson N. Johnson, founder of the Faith Community Church in Greensboro, North Carolina. A one-time student activist at North Carolina A&T State University, Johnson had emerged as a civil rights movement leader in the 1970s. He was a survivor of the infamous Greensboro massacre of November 3, 1979. Later Johnson helped create the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project and became executive director of the Beloved Community Center of Greensboro.¹⁵ Bobo found in Johnson “a man of great wisdom” whose “view on church and community working together . . . is really profound.” In time he became what she calls a “mentor for me on this work.” Within weeks, Bobo had assembled a national board of some forty-five people, who, like Johnson, were ready to devote themselves to building a national movement. The National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice held its founding board meeting on March 31, 1996.¹⁶

In the twelve years since its founding, Bobo has built Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ), as it is now known, into the most important organization in the United States now working around labor and religious issues. Over the years, IWJ has stood with immigrant poultry workers who were seeking to organize in Morganton, North Carolina; with strikers at a Corydon, Indiana, chicken processing plant owned by Tyson’s Foods; with the industrial launderers of Cintas in their efforts to win a union; and with the Immokalee Workers Coalition in its struggle for justice against the Taco Bell chain. IWJ has led direct actions and lobbied on behalf of raising the minimum wage.¹⁷ It has helped recruit a new generation of labor activists among the

15. Sally Avery Bermanzohn, “A Massacre Survivor Reflects on the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” *Radical History Review* 97 (2007): 102–9; Michael Parenti and Carolyn Kazdin, “The Untold Story of the Greensboro Massacre,” *Monthly Review* 33, no. 6 (1981): 42–50.

16. Elizabeth Levitan Spaid, “Clergy Join the Fight For Workers’ Rights,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 16, 1996, 3; Steve Chambers, “Unions, Clergy Unite to Fight for Workers’ Justice, Critics Call Actions Naïve,” *Newark Star-Ledger*, September 1, 1996.

17. Craig Whitlock, “Immigrant Poultry Workers’ Struggle for Respect Draws National Attention: Labor Unions Test Case,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, November 30, 1996 (on Morganton’s immigrant workers, see Leon Fink, *The Maya of Morganton: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003]); “Corydon Strike Seen as Pivotal Battle,” *Associated Press State and Local Wire*, March 8, 1999; “Report Says Cintas Treats Workers Poorly,” *Cincinnati Post*, June 23, 2004;

nation's clergy through the "Seminary Summer" program it launched in 2000.¹⁸ And it is currently designing a union spring break program to attract college students to labor activism in the communities where their colleges and universities are located. The organization now has a national staff of twenty-two, along with sixty to eighty staff people working on local IWJ-affiliated projects around the country. Among the most promising of these are a string of immigrant labor centers, where IWJ is helping low-paid, unorganized immigrant workers win improvements in their wages and working conditions. Toward that end, IWJ helped organize the 2003 "Freedom Rides," seeking to dramatize the struggles of immigrant workers in the United States.¹⁹

As IWJ has grown, Kim Bobo has not lost the insurgent spirit she had when, with the encouragement of her first mentor, Marie Runyon, she stood, arms akimbo, blocking an eviction in Morningside Heights in the mid-1970s. In 2002, Bobo was arrested along with other labor activists at an Auburn, Massachusetts, supermarket for distributing leaflets condemning its health care policies. "The God we serve demands truth and justice for workers," Bobo declared as the police handcuffed her.²⁰ Not only has Bobo maintained her passion for her work, she continues to broaden her objectives. In her new book, *Wage Theft in America: Why Millions of Working Americans Are Not Getting Paid—And What We Can Do about It*,²¹ Bobo describes the growing phenomenon of wage theft—employer efforts to deny workers the pay they have been promised and have rightfully earned—and she outlines her vision for what a progressive U.S. Department of Labor could do to protect America's most vulnerable workers from such abuse.²²

What has she learned from her work with IWJ, and what does she see in its future? In interviews conducted by phone on December 13, 2007, and February 15, 2008, and in Washington, D.C., on December 18, 2007, I asked Kim Bobo to reflect on these questions, to assess the current challenges that her work faces, and to sketch out a vision of the future. She spoke quickly, and with brimming enthusiasm, her voice betraying both the strains of the rich eastern Kentucky accent of her mother's

"Religious Leaders Unite to Demand Minimum Wage Increase," *U.S. Newswire*, June 7, 2001; Susie L. Oh, "Religious Group's Mission Is for Workers," *Albany [NY] Times Union*, May 24, 2003.

18. Jane Lampman, "Seminarists Seek Labor Justice," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 10, 2000, 16.

19. Melanthia Mitchell, "'Freedom Rides' Tout Immigrants' Cause," *Associated Press Online*, September 23, 2003.

20. "Shaw's Has National Interfaith Leader Cuffed and Removed for Bringing a Voice to Workers," *PR Newswire*, June 19, 2002.

21. Kim Bobo, *Wage Theft in America: Why Millions of Working Americans Are Not Getting Paid—And What We Can Do about It* (New York: New Press, 2008).

22. David Freddoso, "Union Man: Whither the Department of Labor under Obama?" *National Review Online*, July 18, 2008, <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=Nzc3YjUoOTU3OTk5MTdkMDJmNDlhODkwYTAYMGQ5OGQ>. Anti-unionists have begun to worry that Bobo might be "an obvious choice" for a top position in the Department of Labor, "perhaps as head of the Wage and Hour Division," with Barack Obama as president.

people and the vocal range she has acquired in many years of church choir singing (she currently serves as a choir director at her Chicago church). Here are relevant excerpts of the December 13, 2007, interview.

Joseph McCartin: *Kim, I would suspect that, working around the labor movement, you work with a lot of people who don't necessarily identify with a religious tradition; they may be somewhat skeptical of people who do, or of churches to some extent. Is that ever a problem? That is sometimes a pretty big cultural chasm, the secular left versus the religious left, and they don't always converse very well.*

Kimberly Bobo: *[laughs]* I don't ever try to convince people of the value of faith. That's got to be a personal conversion. When I work with the labor movement, I just say, "Look, I don't care what you think about faith. I'm not asking you about your personal belief. But it's important to build partnerships with the religious community for three reasons. One, it matters to workers. Workers care that the faith community stands with them. It gives them courage and strength. Two, it matters to employers. If you want to push an employer, the religious community offers power and influence for pushing them. And three, it matters for the public perception of issues. It is too easy for the media to paint issues as just 'internal labor-management fights.' The engagement of the religious community changes the public perception of struggle. I don't care what you think about faith. The religious community is important and you should care about them." These arguments usually work reasonably well with the nonreligious skeptics.

The other group of skeptics are those who are mad at the religious community about a variety of concerns. I try to address most of these concerns pretty head-on. Building trades members are mad about churches that use nonunion labor to build churches. Health care workers and organizers are mad about the anti-union behavior of religious hospital leadership. Perhaps the most anger I've experienced came from teachers upset about the religious community seeking to ban books and sex education. So there are people who are mad at the religious community for a variety of things. I don't try to defend any of the religious community's actions. I simply acknowledge that these things happen. These experiences are valid, but, the three points I made previously are still true. We have to find new ways to engage religious communities on the economic justice issues. When we engage people of faith, it will make a difference for workers, employers, and the public at large.

Most union organizers understand that they must inoculate workers from the negative messages of employers. When I explain that they also must inoculate the religious community, they get it. Too often, organizers view the religious community in moral terms, instead of organizing terms. Organizers must leave aside their personal prejudices or anger about the religious community and focus instead on its power and how to organize it.

So you organize the religious community, and you inoculate them. What about labor? Do you have to inoculate labor about the religious community?

[laughs] A few years ago, our Miami affiliate had a key African American pastor who was fabulous on worker justice issues. He was also in favor of school vouchers. Some of the teacher union leaders were up in arms that we would want this pastor involved in our interfaith group. I try to help people accept that there might be a whole slew of things on which we won't agree—and that that's okay. We've got to work together on the things on which we agree. Recently, I met with a UNITE HERE leader about its organizing campaigns. I just said, "Look, I don't think the gaming organizing is going to be the best for us. Methodists don't feel so good about it." The leader understood. We've got to be strategic about coalition building.

Well, let me ask you about the ten-year growth of IWJ. What do you see as the key steps that occurred along the way as you were building it?

There's a number of things that have been key steps for us. One is a core commitment to building a structure around the country. We've invested a lot of energy recruiting people to be a part of us and building local groups around the country. There are sixty groups around the country—some are fabulous and some are struggling, but there is a structure around the country that didn't exist ten years ago.

Two, we have a core commitment to building partnerships with the labor movement and doing so in ways that help low-wage workers. There are always challenges around building and strengthening partnerships. The really good news is that there are many more organizing campaigns than there were ten years ago and hundreds more organizers who understand the significance and power of engaging the religious community. In the first early years, people didn't believe the religious community was of value. Nonetheless, there are still challenges. The biggest complaint within the religious community is the same complaint that we had ten years ago, which is "Dial a Collar" or "Rent a Priest," the practice of calling up somebody at the last minute to just come say a prayer as opposed to really fully engaging the religious community as partners. That tension of being "used" versus being fully engaged as a partner is still there. But there are many more situations in which the religious community is a genuine partner in thinking about strategy, engaging the community, and ensuring that workers have the right to organize. Religious leaders conduct fact-finding delegations, meet with employers, serve on negotiating committees, oversee community elections, and have much more substantial engagement than ten years ago. This is great progress.

Three, we have a core commitment to helping the religious community understand the religious significance of worker justice issues. When we started, hunger issues were legitimate religious concerns, housing was legitimate, but worker justice issues weren't considered within most religious social justice activists. We had to institutionalize worker justice being part of the social justice work of the religious community. To do this, we wrote and distributed tons of educational material, bulletin inserts, and worship guides. The importance of religious education resources

comes straight out of my Bread for the World training. Every so often people say, “It’s very interesting how your stuff kind of looks like Bread for the World’s.” Yeah. There’s a reason for that. There are only two social justice organizations that provide faith-based resources in every publication—Bread for the World and Interfaith Worker Justice. We’ve created Catholic Labor Day material, as well as Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Jewish, and Muslim Labor Day resources. In our ten-year history we’ve created more resources for the religious community on work and economic justice than all of the denominations combined.

Four, it has been important for us to engage with the Department of Labor. Even though we all know that the best protection for low-wage workers is union representation and a union contract, we also know that a declining number of workers are represented by unions. Thus, if we care about protecting and empowering low-wage workers, we have to support a strong and engaged Department of Labor. Early in our history, in 1996, we publicly pushed the Department of Labor to investigate the poultry industry. We were involved with some poultry campaigns, but the entire industry seemed in crisis. I suspect that the Department of Labor leaders had already planned to investigate the industry. When they responded positively to our demand, we began a series of partnership activities with the Department of Labor. We have actually built and tried to maintain some level of relationship with the Department of Labor, particularly with the wage and hour division, even under this [Bush] administration. It was a little rough when we sued the Department of Labor, but there are so many wonderful career people at the agency. I’m going to take a three-month sabbatical from March to June to do some writing about what a visionary faith-based Department of Labor might look like. I have many ideas about what a real “Frances Perkins” Department of Labor might look like. Figuring out how to work with the Department of Labor is really important. We need to create partnerships between the religious community, the labor community, and the Department of Labor. Collectively, between the religious community, labor community, and Department of Labor, we must jointly clean up the most egregious industries for workers. Recently, I was in Phoenix meeting with a group of residential construction workers. Their working conditions were appalling. Workers were not getting paid minimum wage, they had no protective gear, and they were told they were independent contractors, not employees. When we met with dry wallers, all immigrants, they showed us how they stack two sets of stilts on top of one another and then stand on them to tape and sand the vaulted ceilings. They work without masks, let alone other protective gear. These guys are not even making minimum wage. My friends in the building industry say this picture describes residential construction across the country. Well, this is a crisis. There is plenty for the labor unions to do. There’s plenty for the religious community to do. We need the Department of Labor to aggressively challenge this abusive industry. We’ve got to be thinking about this work collectively and at the highest levels. Too many folks in the labor community basically think the Department of Labor is a waste of time. Perhaps that has been the case in recent years, but we can’t let it remain that way. From early on, Interfaith Worker Justice has engaged

with the Department of Labor. We've helped create and distribute worker rights material for poultry workers. We wrote and distributed some joint bulletin inserts for congregations on worker rights. And, our workers' centers have done their share (sometimes more than their share) in reaching out to local DOL [Department of Labor] staff.

Five, our work to create and build workers' centers is significant. Seven or eight years ago, in places where we had interfaith groups that had been around for a few years and known in the religious community, pastors started referring random workers to us. You can imagine the situation: a worker visits a pastor describing not having gotten paid. The pastor refers the worker to the interfaith committee. So we started getting random workers referred to us. When we tried simply referring the workers to unions, we quickly learned that many of the workers came from shops that were too small for unions to organize or from sectors where no unions were focusing. In the early days, I remember losing many days of work trying to help these poor workers with horrible situations. First we decided to create a workers' rights manual, which we thought we would just send to people when they called. We did worker rights manuals in English, Spanish, and Polish after learning that neither the labor unions nor the Department of Labor has any comprehensive manuals. The process of creating those first manuals helped me understand how stupid some of the laws were and how totally unhelpful many of the agencies were. For example, the Wage and Hour phone message machine told one to leave a message where an inspector could call you back between 9 and 5. That doesn't exactly work for workers employed in sweat shops! Much to our surprise, these manuals generated more workers calling us instead of less. Eventually, we created a worker rights center, which has become kind of a drop-in center for workers who haven't gotten paid or who have been injured or whatever. Now there are nineteen workers' centers around the country that are affiliated with us. We view them as the Catholic labor schools of 2007. Instead of being in the church basement, they're somewhere in a church, and instead of being just Catholic, they're multifaith. Workers' centers teach people about unions, train workers about their rights in the workplace, and then help them solve problems for themselves. We help workers file complaints with all the government agencies, we connect people with attorneys, we hook people up with labor unions (if there are enough workers), and we involve people of faith in doing direct action to get workers' money back. We take clergy with workers to visit employers. We say, "We've got all these forms filled out to file with Wage and Hour because you didn't pay these workers, but why don't you just go ahead and pay them?" We have a pretty good track record with people paying workers on the spot. Our workers around the country are handling a significant number of cases. Frankly, we're doing the work of the Department of Labor, but with only limited cooperation and operating on a shoestring. I expect we will have another five or six worker rights centers by the end of '08.

Six, our work with seminary students is critical. From day one, the first board meeting on March 31, 1996, I looked around the room and knew we had to focus

on young religious leaders. I'd put together the best religious leaders in the country on labor issues and it was an old group. It was just a visual wake-up call to me that if we did not involve young religious leaders in this work, we were going to die. We made a strategic decision to focus on the new generation of religious leaders, not the whole generation of clergy we'd lost because they had grown up not involved in labor issues. The clergy members in their thirties and forties by and large didn't know labor. It was the clergy members in their sixties and seventies who knew labor. Our decision to focus on new young clergy and future clergy has shown immediate results—there are now young pastors of congregations who are deeply committed to worker and economic justice. A critical program has been our Seminary Summer program, which places seminary and rabbinical students working directly for unions for the summer. We began the program jointly with the AFL-CIO. We now work with both AFL-CIO and Change to Win unions. Out of that program emerged four “Seminarians for Worker Justice” groups that work in communities where there is a consortium of seminary campuses. This spring [2008], we are publishing a worker justice reader, which is a course book for classes at seminaries. We've conducted J-term classes at seminaries. We've led workshops at worker-support actions at the Society of Christian Ethics, the Society of Jewish Ethics, and the American Academy of Religion. We are doing our best to equip future pastors, rabbis, and imams so they will have a heart for labor issues. What could be more critical for building future partnerships and changing the direction of the nation?

Do you feel like you've begun to reach the goal where you have now made labor “legitimate” as a religious issue, as you say?

Yes and no. People in the religious community now do talk about “worker justice.” This term we coined is now part of the religious activist lexicon, but that doesn't mean that our work is as broad and deep as it needs to be. And, the work is still controversial, especially if you happen to run a religious hospital. It is still easier to work on soup kitchens than labor campaigns, but momentum and understanding are growing. The work is much more mainstream than it was.

Can you look at a campaign or two that you feel really helped to measure this growth over the past ten years?

There was just some phenomenal work done in the last few months in Indianapolis and Cincinnati on janitor campaigns with SEIU [Service Employees International Union]. The religious community must have done at least fifteen delegations to building owners in Indianapolis, talking to them about why they ought to push their building contractors to accept janitors that are represented by the union. The religious leaders organized prayer vigils downtown, including one in which six clergy got arrested—a first in Indianapolis. In Cincinnati, the clergy organized similar support activities and served on the negotiating committee for the contract. This level of engagement in mid-American communities such as Indianapolis and Cincinnati was unimaginable ten years ago. This is exciting and important work.

What do you see happening in the next ten years with the organization? Where would you like it to be?

The last decade has been a really rough environment for workers. We've had such a hostile administration. Obviously, I dream (and pray for) an administration that makes workers a priority and a Department of Labor that believes that protecting and advancing low-wage workers is its mission. With a caring administration and Department of Labor, we could develop some phenomenal partnerships with the labor and religious communities which could begin to significantly improve conditions.

Interfaith Worker Justice wants to be more engaged in public policy. Having worked for Bread for the World and help[ed] build a grassroots advocacy structure, I know how much we need to build our grassroots advocacy capacity, but we are starting. This year, we plan to build a congressional district structure in twenty swing districts. Over the next ten years, we will be focusing on building the structure, getting our groups meeting with members of Congress, and putting in congregational networks, telephone trees, e-mail networks, or whatever we need to be more effective on public policy issues that could improve conditions for workers in low-wage jobs.

That seems to be coming around full circle to your Bread for the World work.

Bread for the World was good training. The focus on grassroots organizing, congregational education, and public policy advocacy made sense for Bread and makes sense for Interfaith Worker Justice. Another new focus that builds on some of Bread for the World's work is the development of a congregational program. We've got thirty "guinea pig congregations" with whom we're building a stronger direct relationship, because we are doing a better job involving clergy and the leadership of congregations than we are the rank-and-file membership of congregations. This is an organizing challenge. It's not an ideological challenge—it's an organizing challenge. How do we create resources and things people can do within the life of their congregation that are small enough and simple enough that could actually make a difference in helping workers? Lots of what we ask interfaith groups to do, such as delegating building owners or praying in lobbies, requires pretty high levels of commitments. We must create activities that are lower level, simpler kinds of things that could engage more people in congregations on these issues. Figuring out simple organizing tasks that are useful is an organizing challenge.

Do you think also about transnational connections? Labor is increasingly looking at going transnational in their organizing. Is Interfaith Worker Justice becoming more transnational?

I've had some conversations with folks in Australia who have expressed interest in building an IWJ kind of group in Australia. There have been some inquiries from London occasionally and a few other places. Even though it would be much more fun to travel overseas than to Duluth in January, we believe our focus and call is to build the work here in the U.S. We have participated in meetings with folks who run worker centers in Mexico and are actually having some conversations about possibly

doing some cross-training between staff of the Mexican worker centers and staff in our worker centers. This would be really exciting. But beyond that we [have] got our hands full. My husband [Stephen Coats] runs an organization called US-LEAP, the U.S. Labor Education in the Americas Project, which supports labor organizing in Central and South America that is done in U.S. corporations. He's very interested in this international question. Occasionally there are efforts where our immediate work extends beyond our border. For example, on the janitor's campaign in Indianapolis, one of the building owners who was not doing the right thing was a company called Mansur [HDG Mansur Capital Group, LLC]. The company wanted to go public on the stock exchange in London and Dubai for being Shari'a compliant. We sent a clergy organizer on our staff who had been working in Indianapolis and an imam to London to talk with people at a Shari'a compliance conference where the director of Mansur was speaking. We did press work in both London and Dubai about how this company wasn't Shari'a compliant in terms of its treatment of workers. So we've done a little bit of international work, but not really much.

What do you see going on now in the faith communities, and does it make you feel that we are entering perhaps a more promising time? One thing I think about is what's been said recently about people like Rick Warren and some of the evangelicals who are becoming more interested in social justice issues, it seems. Do you find that kind of thing and what do you see going on in the faith communities, where are they heading?

There are both really good and really challenging trends in the religious community. An important positive is the demise of the complete right-wing control on the evangelical world. We see lots of evangelicals involved in the work at the local level. The evangelical world doesn't have quite the national denominational structures that the more mainlines or the Catholics or the Jews have, so it is easier to engage them at the local level than it is at the national level. There are many evangelicals becoming engaged, particularly around immigrant workers.

Another exciting trend is the engagement of young clergy and their congregations. There's a guy who was an intern, a seminary student from Garrett, who was involved in doing an internship with us. He's now a pastor at Lovely Lane United Methodist Church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. What's the first thing he does when he gets to Lovely Lane? He connects with the labor movement. So we've got these folks who are connecting as local pastors all over the country right now.

The immigrant issues, which are intimately connected to worker justice issues at this moment in history, are creating possibilities for engaging new religious communities. Even though immigrant issues are incredibly divisive in the society at large, the religious leadership in the nation is very clear on welcoming immigrants.

Several denominations are finding new ways to institutionalize worker justice issues within the denominations. The National Baptists have a labor roundtable, the United Church of Christ has a labor relations person, and the United Methodist Church has a taskforce on the worker. The Jewish Reform movement recently approved a wonderful new labor policy, perhaps the best new denominational policy.

Even though there is not as much denominational work going on as I might like, there is much more structure and engagement at the denominational level than a few years ago.

The last positive trend is the Muslim community's eagerness to build partnerships. The Muslim community has been under such attack in recent years. Its leadership has recognized the importance of reaching out to people and participating in interfaith activities. We have found enormous receptiveness to engaging in low-wage workers issues, especially given the serious problems Muslim workers face, especially in service jobs.

There are also some challenges we face. Within the Catholic Church, the priest abuse crisis has forced cutbacks with the peace and justice offices, which directly affects our work. These peace and justice offices are incredibly important for helping us connect with parishes. This crisis has also distracted the church leadership from social justice issues. As a good bishop friend of mine says, "We don't spend any time talking about social justice issues. All we talk about [is] sex abuse." The crisis diverted both the attention and the resources of the Catholic Church away from worker justice issues. The mainline Protestants are in a period of financial retrenchment. Many Protestant denominations have been attacked internally by the right wing, making them extremely cautious on social justice issues, thus limiting their leadership, particularly at the national level. Many in the Jewish community are so focused on the situation in the Middle East that they don't focus much on economic justice issues, which are actually very core in the life and history of the U.S. Jewish community.

So each of the major faith groups is struggling with an issue that might hamper it responding to issues of worker justice?

But all these challenges just are. We must build on the positive trends and work around the challenges.

Any final thoughts on how you see your work in perspective?

The work of engaging the religious community in labor issues is nothing new. We are building on much history in both the religious and labor communities that went before us. Our hope is that we can contribute to making our nation one in which those who work can raise their families in dignity. ■

