

South Carolina Steelworkers and the Poor People's Campaign: 50 years in the struggle

By Kerry Taylor for [Facing South](#), June 2022

The Poor People's Campaign: National Call for Moral Revival was formed in 2018 to reignite the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign on its 50-year anniversary. Like its forebear, the current Poor People's Campaign seeks an end to militarism, racism, and poverty, as well as ecological devastation and the false moral narrative of religious nationalism.

The [present collaboration](#) between the United Steelworkers and the Poor People's Campaign in South Carolina has an equally long history. In 1968, following a summer of protest in Washington, D.C., the Poor People's Campaign, led by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, shifted its focus to South Carolina, where it came to the assistance of [striking hospital and sanitation workers in Charleston](#). The following year, SCLC organizers moved 60 miles up the coast to Georgetown to support striking Black and white employees of Georgetown Steel, a German-owned company.



Georgetown Steel built the plant in South Carolina after a hard sell from state officials that included tax concessions, the promise of an ample supply of cheap laborers, and a pledge to give management a free hand in setting wages and working conditions. Within a week of the plant's opening in the summer of 1969, a 22-year-old worker was killed in an accident, and numerous reports of dangerous working conditions soon followed. Workers also complained that the plant was poisoning the air, endangering their lives and those of local residents.

In the spring of 1970, the workers voted overwhelmingly in favor of union representation, but the company refused to negotiate in good faith. In August the workers went on strike to demand a contract. They marched through Georgetown, walked picket lines to prevent replacement workers from taking their jobs, and attempted to stop the loading and unloading of ships at the port. SCLC's assistance proved to be invaluable as staff organizers recruited faith leaders to support the workers and staged protests that included acts of nonviolent civil disobedience.

On Dec. 5, 1970, with negotiations at a standstill, the Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy, King's successor as SCLC president, led a mass march of nearly 500 strikers and sympathizers. "The Civil War broke the ability of the plantation-owning class to make war and oppress people, but it did not kill their desire to do so," Abernathy told the strikers and their supporters at Bethel AME Church. After the failure of Reconstruction, he explained, "the plantation owners were free to make war on poor Black and white people again. And they have continued to do this down to this day." Abernathy expressed his joy at seeing Black and white steelworkers "coming together to fight for our common cause" and explained that he would stand with them whether they were all Black or all white. "I am here and have insisted that SCLC support you . . . because you are right."

Abernathy concluded with remarks that would be as appropriate for the tire plant workers organizing in Richburg in 2022 as they were to steelworkers in Georgetown in 1970: "You should not have to work in a polluted factory or mill. All working people should have safe working conditions. All working people should have a say in their own lives — and elected officials should see to it that we have such basic human rights. And if they do not, we should see to it that they are no longer elected officials."

Negotiations resumed a few days later, and workers approved their first contract with a unanimous vote in February 1971. For the next 50 years, [the workers continued to produce steel in Georgetown](#) represented by United Steelworkers Local 7898. The mill, which changed ownership several times in recent decades, was closed during the pandemic, and its proposed reopening is a source of intense debate in Georgetown.

(Photo of the Georgetown Steel plant taken in 2017 by Carol M. Highsmith [via the Library of Congress](#).)