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THE COLLECTIVE

Published by:
MOREHOUSE
INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE LABOR STUDIES

SUBLIME LEADERSHIP

Black women are reshaping the global landscape in every area of human endeavor with their unique brand of governance

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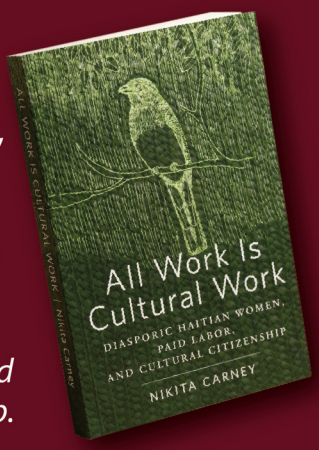
INTERNATIONAL WORKERS' DAY AND HAITIAN HERITAGE MONTH

The HSSMA Division welcomes **Dr. Nikita Carney**, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Bentley University, for a conversation about her new book — *All Work is Cultural Work: Diasporic Haitian Women, Paid Labor, and Cultural Citizenship.*



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MOREHOUSE

HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES, MEDIA & THE ARTS

WELCOME . . .

. . . to the fourth issue of *The Collective*, a digital magazine published by the International Comparative Labor Studies (ICLS) program at Morehouse College. In this issue we celebrate a force that has long been the backbone of progress in our communities, our nation, and our world: the visionary leadership of Black women.

This issue honors the tireless work of Georgia State Representative Kim Schofield, whose advocacy bridges the gap between policy and people; Jeanne Wardford, who lifts dreams through philanthropy; and Roxanne Brown, president of the United Steelworkers, a champion for equity in the industrial landscape.

Their journeys reach beyond professional milestones; they are testaments to resilience and blueprints for success. By weaving together unique leadership styles with a shared commitment to justice and workers, these women demonstrate that true power lies in service. As you explore their stories, we hope you find the inspiration to lead with the same courage, brilliance, and unwavering dedication to the collective good.

We dedicate this issue to Black women who are making a difference in their homes, their communities, and on their jobs — from Africa to the Caribbean to the United States.

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Publisher and Editor

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CONTENTS

MOREHOUSE | INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE LABOR STUDIES

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GEORGIA STATE REPRESENTATIVE KIM SCHOFIELD: A STUDY IN AUTHENTICITY AND VISION

By Mike Tucker

In the hustling halls of the Georgia State Capitol, where policy and politics can create an explosive mix, State Representative Kim Schofield, D-63, moves with a purpose that is both magnetic and immovable. Representing a diverse corridor including portions of Southeast Atlanta, College Park, East Point, Hapeville, City of South Fulton, and Union City, Schofield has become a beacon for those left adrift in government red tape. Her story is not just one of political ascent; it is an inspiring story of turning personal trials into public triumph.

For Schofield, leadership isn't about the title—it's about the truth. "In this day and age, when you think about leadership, people are looking for transparency," she says. "It's not necessarily that leadership is perfection. It's being a person that says you're going to do it, be a person of your word."

Born in New York and tempered by the professional rigors of Boston and Atlanta, she views influence as a natural byproduct of staying true to one's design. "It is being comfortable and having a self-governance about yourself that draws people to you," she says. This "alignment" allows her to read a room and match her energy to the needs of the moment, always focusing on coaching others into their destinies.

She describes the essence of Black women's leadership as powerful, relatable, and resilient. "You can't tell a Black woman's story without her," she asserts. "To live and look through the eyes of a Black woman, nobody can tell it and do it like we can."

Her own story took a pivotal turn twenty-six years ago with a diagnosis of lupus, a chronic autoimmune disease that causes inflammation and pain. The disease didn't just impact her health; it stripped away her job and her sense of security. "I lost my job. I lost my healthcare. I lost everything because people said, 'you don't look sick,'" she recalls.

Rather than retreating, she turned her "lived experience" into a legislative weapon. She began walking the Capitol halls as an advocate, eventually helping pass Georgia's first bill to recognize lupus and secure funding. Today, she says, 92% of the chamber wears purple on Lupus Advocacy Day — a testament to her belief that "one voice makes a difference."

Schofield's economic vision is equally bold. While many focus on the daunting "wealth gap," Schofield—a small business owner herself—prefers to focus on tangible tools of empowerment like Black Employee Ownership (BEO). She understands that the playing field has never been level.

> "The playing field has never been equal, and every time we try to even get on the field... the goalpost is moved."
>
> **Kim Schofield**

Sitting on the House Committee on Small Business Development, she advocates for a shift from being "consumers of brands" to being "innovators of brands." She supports shared ownership as one way to build generational legacy. " ... it is looking within: how do I give back to my community and offer things that have not been considered," she explains.

Schofield's ideas go beyond the financial; they are about autonomy. "People don't own you, they only rent your gifts," she says of the traditional employer-employee relationship. "You rent my gifts when I work for you."

That's why education is a fundamental building block of the representative's plan to create a more equitable economic reality. Morehouse College, through its International Comparative Labor Studies (ICLS) program, hosted the *Vision and Victory Conference* in November 2025 to expand Black Employee Ownership, an event Schofield attended as a panelist.

She regards Morehouse's role as pivotal because it can provide the one thing policymakers cannot ignore: "Data speaks, data speaks," she repeats. "And when we have that, and you can push the data in the direction where it needs to go, it can just not just change the culture, but impact policy." For Schofield, having a reputable institution like Morehouse provide the research on Black labor and ownership is the "cherry on top" that could hold other legislators accountable.

> "People don't own you, they only rent your gifts."

She don't take tea for the fever, says an enduring African American idiom that applies to Schofield, who insists the letters in her first name stand for Keep It Moving. So, whether it's heat stroke protections for outdoor workers or securing fertility treatment access for those with lupus and sickle cell, Schofield is in the fight. And she wants constituents to join her. "This is a collaborative partnership," she says. "I represent your issue ... You own your issue."

And she is unabashed when she talks about her legacy: "When I leave here, I want my tombstone to say, 'done' — D-O-N-E," she says. "I want people to say I helped them."

JEANNE WARDFORD: A VETERAN FUNDER SAYS COLLECTIVE ACTION AND EMPLOYEE OWNERSHIP CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE NOW

Dr. Jeanne Wardford, a program officer for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, is known for her work in bettering lives in the private and public sector. Her leadership has brought innovative solutions to stubborn community and business challenges. She was a panelist at the recent *Vision and Victory Conference* on Black Employee Ownership (BEO), sponsored by the International Comparative Labor Studies (ICLS) program at Morehouse College in Atlanta. Dr. Wardford's intriguing insights prompted an interview request, which she fulfilled despite a full schedule. Here are the edited excerpts of her conversation with Mike Tucker, managing editor of *The Collective:*

Tucker: Can you talk about what it means for Black women to be in leadership positions and what it means in spaces and places? What has it meant to you to see Black women in leadership positions, and how has it helped you become a leader?
Wardford: I think that women's leadership is really important, and particularly Black women. We stand on some powerful shoulders, you know, of women who have poured into us and mentored us, and in many ways paved roads for us to follow. And then there's also a much broader network and system that consists of sharing, bonding, connecting, collective action, and sisterhood.

Tucker: How have those experiences translated into your mentoring or advising other Black women to make them stronger leaders? What factors do you stress in your interactions with them?
Wardford: The thing that I think is most important is to determine your role. There is always an opportunity for you to lead and show up in a way that advances the work. I remember my mother telling me, "When you get a job, learn every job there. So, if they take away one seat, you can sit in another chair." It sounds very similar to what I tell young people now. I also tell them to dress for where you want to be, not where you are.

Tucker: Believe success lies in the collective advancement of Black women.
Wardford: If you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go forward and make change, go together. That's how I view Black women in leadership.

Tucker: Speaking of Black women in leadership, La June Montgomery Tabron is the first woman and first African American chief executive of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, one the largest private foundations in the U.S.
Wardford: I was not working here when she got the job. But I had been a Kellogg grantee and knew her. The whole community was so excited and so happy for her. It was like you could hear the glass ceiling shattering.

Tucker: When Ms. Tabron ascended, what did that validate inside you and your colleagues?
Wardford: That we are enough. Under her leadership, we have seen this organization thrive and grow and push the envelope. I feel so much a sense of pride when I even think about it or when I have the opportunity to talk about her, her work, and her leadership. She believes in empowering people. When you talk about leadership, you're also talking about expanding access to opportunity.

Tucker: In these challenging times, how do we create safe places for children to thrive?
Wardford: By making sure that their families have access to good housing, jobs, and health care. So, we continue to do our work. My portfolio includes strategies for small businesses under 50 people, who are hiring. When businesses are stable, employees are stable. And that's also why we are advancing work for employee ownership.

Tucker: When employees are stable, neighborhoods are stable.
Wardford: That's right.

Tucker: And when neighborhoods are stable, communities are stable, and the region becomes more stable. Do you find this true?
Wardford: Oh, absolutely. And, as research shows, when families are stable, kids are going to the same school ... they're not having to start over again.

Tucker: You recently attended the Black Employee Ownership conference at Morehouse. I think shared ownership models like BEO hold more promise than talk of closing the wealth gap.
Wardford: Closing the wealth gap is a lofty goal, but I think we ought to worry about getting stable, social, economic, and political models that make the community thrive.

Tucker: Is BEO a possible stepping stone to the future you envision?
Wardford: The research suggests that when employees have ownership, they earn higher wages, have access to a retirement fund, and experience lower turnover. They have tools that can help them build their own generational wealth, not just cash to purchase homes, and other wealth-building strategies.

Tucker: Much better ideas than perseverating on the wealth gap.
Wardford: Maybe we can't take over Chrysler, but there are examples of employee ownership of larger companies, such as Publix Super Markets, which employs about 260,000 employees. We believe employee ownership is a solid model for helping individuals build generational wealth.

Tucker: A win-win proposition.
Wardford: When employee ownership structures are in place, it is advantageous for both the worker and the owner. The owner transitioning out doesn't pay taxes, which means all the profits can go back into the business, and the employees share in that.

Tucker: Sounds like a winning model that needs more expertise, lawyers, and other experts in shared ownership models.
Wardford: We have funded Rutgers, which has an online training program for Black lawyers and accountants to help educate interested businesses about employee ownership. That is the biggest piece of our work there ... building momentum. The key is that we begin helping these millions of businesses transition through education and ongoing research.

Tucker: What role can Morehouse's International Comparative Labor Studies (ICLS) play in workers' understanding of shared ownership?
Wardford: Morehouse can take the mystery out of employee ownership. It sounds like this, like a very arduous, ginormous thing, right? But people don't really understand how it works tactically. So, education is the biggest piece. Second, integrate it into business programs so people understand that BEO is just a different business model.

Tucker: What about programmatic enhancements, such as a minor in Labor Studies and certificates? programs?
Wardford: They would fare very well. We are seeing all these dramatic policy shifts that align around business. It is a great opportunity for students at Morehouse to assess the lay of the land: What's going on to advance various business models? What role does technology play?

Tucker: You're talking about an interdisciplinary approach that Morehouse could offer.
Wardford: That's what they've done at Rutgers. In their labor studies, they have an entire employee ownership cohort.

Tucker: You've alluded to the immense potential of learning, research, and practice in developing Black Employee Ownership in a cultural context. The power of doing it right. And who better to do it than one of the preeminent HBCUs in the country, the alma mater of Dr. Martin Luther King?
Wardford: This approach is a racial and economic equity strategy. If nowhere else, this is where we start leveling the playing field, right?

FORGED IN STEEL: BOLD NEW FEMALE LEADERSHIP FOR THE UNITED STEELWORKERS

International President Roxanne Brown refuses to be 'stunned into inaction'

Roxanne Brown is a woman ready to meet the moment. Last year, she made history by being elected the first woman and the first Black person to lead the United Steelworkers (USW), the largest industrial labor union in North America. The Steelworkers have been at the forefront of some of the most consequential struggles for workers' rights, and today, it boasts more than 850,000 active and retired members across key sectors of the economy, including steel, oil, chemicals, mining, and healthcare. As Brown officially stepped into the role in March, she will lead the labor movement during one of its most difficult political moments. It is clear that she feels the weight of the challenges ahead, but remains optimistic about the transformative power of unions. Brown spoke with freelance writer Danielle Noel about her vision and how she will approach leading the influential union. The following is an edited transcript of their conversation:

You're making history as the first Black woman to lead the USW. Tell me a bit about your vision and the impact you hope to have.

Brown: I'll be the 10th international president, leading the 10th International Executive Board. At every iteration of our union, we've always leaned into the moment. I don't take it lightly that a Black woman – a Black immigrant woman – is getting ready to lead the largest industrial union in North America. I was having a conversation with some friends last year before I started my campaign to run, and they asked, "What are you doing?" Sisters aren't raising their hands right now to lead. We're taking a step back because we've become a target. This is when we do lean in. This is when we challenge every notion that exists about us. It's important for our membership to look up and see somebody who shares their story and is ready to fight for them.

The labor movement has evolved, but it has historically been a challenging environment for women and people of color. How did you navigate the racism and sexism?

> "My story has not been without challenges. I've certainly been in the meeting where I've been overlooked because I'm a woman, because I'm Black, or because of my youth."
>
> **Roxanne Brown**

The triple threat. I certainly have dealt with instances where I went into a room as a subject matter expert and people didn't expect someone like me to know the things I know or speak the way I speak. But the best professional advice I've ever received was from one of my best mentors, Fred Redmond, Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL-CIO: "In every room that you're in, just to show up as you. Some people are going to ride with you ... some people won't respect you. But your charge always is to show up as you are and meet people where they are, and you will find those connections."

How would you characterize your leadership style?

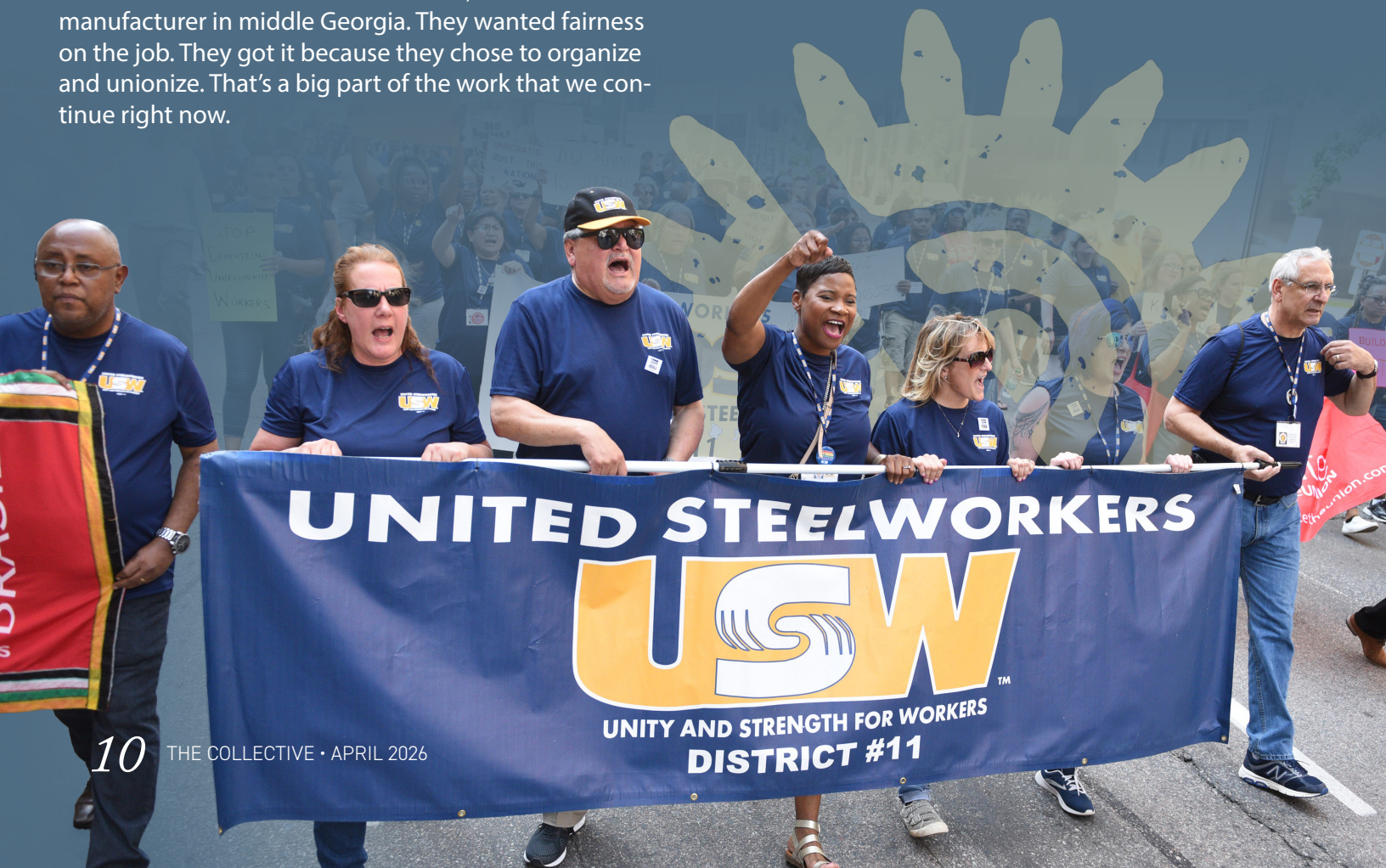
I'm a collaborative leader. I don't think that there's any job that I should not do as a leader. Everything that we hold true as working people ... is under attack or has been destroyed or will likely be destroyed within the next three years. So, it's wartime, and if you liken it to a general, I'm not the general that will be in the back giving demands. I'm on the front line fighting the war because we have to face it together to really take back what has been lost. And not just take back what's been lost, but try to create something even better than we had before.

What keeps you up at night?
I'm a mom of an eight-year-old, and what keeps me up at night is fear that her life is so uncertain. Because the actions of just one year have set *her* future back years. I'm Jamaican, and one of the phrases that we use is "Your memory tree dead." Meaning, your memory is not long. Bad things happen, and then we move on quickly. We do not have the luxury of forgetting in this moment. My little Black eight-year-old daughter, and millions of little Black children, regardless of color, are counting on us not to forget. They are counting on us not to be inundated by all of the bad and be stunned into inaction.

More than 300,000 Black women have lost or left their jobs. As Black women face growing economic uncertainty, how does USW plan to address this issue? We've been very intentional about organizing strategy because even though we've lost a lot in the way of the opportunities that existed at the end of the last administration around job growth, investments, and expansion of industry and jobs, there's still much to be had in the existing economy. A lot of our organizing, and that of other unions has been in the South. We focus a lot of attention on middle Georgia in particular, which is predominantly Black. We organized Kumho Tire a few years back and we were able to be a beacon of economic uplift for the workers there who sought a union. Likewise with the workers at Blue Bird, an electric bus manufacturer in middle Georgia. They wanted fairness on the job. They got it because they chose to organize and unionize. That's a big part of the work that we continue right now.

How can we ensure that you're not the last woman of color to ascend to USW president?
Brown: A key obligation that I have is to make sure that I am not the last and that I am helping to not just identify other Black woman leaders or other women of color leaders. It's also to make sure that they have the support they need. The power of a conversation can never be overstated. You can have one conversation with one young sister, and that lights the fire in her belly that she never felt before. So, in all the ways that I can be supportive and accessible and ... identify the next generation of leaders of this union, that is a big part of my charge.

***The Collective* is published by the International Comparative Labor Studies (ICLS) program at Morehouse College. What should the program prioritize to help drive interest in unions among young students?**
Work is changing, and it's essential that young people understand what unionization can do for them as they look to earn a fair living and safe working conditions. The International Comparative Labor Studies (ICLS) program at Morehouse College is uniquely poised to reach these young people, teaching them about the struggles of workers who have come before them and the great power that they have now through collective action.



BOOK REVIEW

A YOUNG ACTIVIST CLIMBS INTO LABOR HISTORY

By Danielle Noel

In one of the final chapters of Karen Lewis's compelling memoir, *I Didn't Come Here to Lie: My Life and Education,* she describes what she believes is the making of a strong union leader: "In my opinion, if you aren't a good teacher, you'll never be a good unionist." Lewis, as it turns out, was not only a dedicated and respected educator who poured into her students in Chicago's public schools, but also became one of the most effective and revered union leaders in the history of the labor movement.

Co-written with Elizabeth Todd-Breland — historian, professor, and former vice president of the Chicago Public School Board — Lewis shares her extraordinary, somewhat unusual journey from an outspoken young activist to the formidable president of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), where she led more than 25,000 educators on a successful seven-day strike in 2012, the first the city had seen in 25 years. Throughout the book, Lewis draws on her early life experiences to impart invaluable lessons about leadership, courage, and challenging power structures that enable prejudice and strip working people of their most basic dignity and rights.

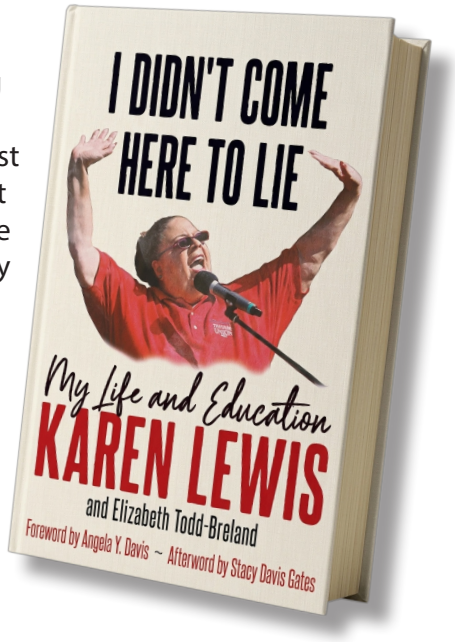
Growing up in Chicago as the daughter of two Black educators during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, she witnessed firsthand the impact of segregation and "white flight" on public school students and teachers. Her father encouraged her activism and independent streak, fostering her confidence and endless curiosity about the world around her. That curiosity, her passion, and her refusal to accept the status quo propelled her to transform CTU into a counterforce against the obliteration of neighborhood schools and pathways into family-sustaining careers for aspiring Black teachers.

During her tenure, Chicago became known as an "epicenter for the education justice fight in America." Lewis writes.

Lewis tragically died from brain cancer in 2021 before she could see the book finished, but Todd-Breland makes fantastic work of capturing Lewis' voice. Lewis' personality jumps right off the page, and it always feels as if you are having a real conversation *with* her. Each chapter and lesson of the book thoughtfully builds on the last, creating a complex, multidimensional vision of Lewis and the events that shaped her.

For anyone interested in unions, this is essential reading, especially at a time when the movement faces unprecedented attacks. In the most riveting chapter, Lewis describes the 2012 strike and the painstaking efforts she took to change public opinion about public school teachers, build collaboration within the CTU, and engender support from public school parents and community organizations.

You can't help but feel incredible loss knowing that this brilliant and compassionate strategist is no longer with us, but you are buoyed by hope knowing that her legacy lives on in trade unionists like current CTU President Stacy Davis Gates, who learned directly from Lewis and is now leading the movement into the future.



I Didn't Come Here to Lie: My Life and Education

by Karen Lewis and Elizabeth Todd-Breland

Haymarket Books| 272 pages
Hardback: $16.77 | Ebook: $5.99

Danielle Noel is a writer based in Maryland.

MORE THAN 300,000 BLACK WOMEN HAVE DISAPPEARED FROM LABOR ROLLS

Talk about the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

Thanks to an anti-DEI mindset, targeted cuts, and vague missives from the White House, federal government, and corporations cowed by presidential reprisals, Black women lost 319,000 jobs between February and July 2025. That figure from the news media is way out of whack when compared with other demographic groups: white women gained 142,000 jobs; Latina women experienced an increase of 176,000; and white men enjoyed a whopping gain of 365,000 jobs.

The forces against diversity, equity, and inclusion have even targeted networking programs and workplace initiatives fostering inclusion. The Trump-led attack has obliterated jobs for Black women, heavily employed by the federal government, and their prospects for future employment and training. Essentially, the president and his minions have made D-E-I modern-day scarlet letters.

One organization fighting back is the National Women's Law Center (NWLC), founded in 1972, and dedicated to gender justice in the courts, in public policy, and in society. Katie Sandson is senior counsel for education and workplace justice at NWLC. She discussed the situation with Mike Tucker, managing editor of *The Collective*. Here are the edited excerpts:

What are Black women doing that they deserve such attention and warrant these results? It is certainly a systemic issue we're seeing, driven by a number of factors that are compounding at this moment. We're seeing policies and actions at the federal level that are undermining workplace protections for women, and that particularly impact Black women and other women of color. The rates of unemployment for Black women continue to spike. We saw in February of 2026 that the number jumped to 7.1%, up from January.

We're also seeing a continuing wage gap, and that compounds the pain of unemployment. Why? Yes, the wage gap has now widened for the second year in a row, and Black women face some of the largest wage gaps. The wage gap is driven by discrimination, gaps in workplace protections, and other factors. And it does compound the effects of unemployment, because it leaves you with less of a cushion in cases where people are facing a loss of income. And we're also seeing, again, the disproportionate impacts of the attacks on the federal workforce.

The bottom-line impact is devastating.
The federal government is the largest employer in the U.S., and federal jobs have been really critical to building a path to the middle class, to financial stability ... for a lot of workers, but especially for Black people, women, and other workers who have historically faced high rates of discrimination in the workplace. We've seen the federal government jobs being slashed at this level, like the large-scale DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) cuts. And at the same time, the president was trying to get rid of any job or agency that might relate to what they were calling "illegal DEI." These are all pushing workers out of good jobs, and women and people of color, and Black women, particularly, are hit hardest by these cuts. We did this analysis last year, showing that the agencies most targeted by the large-scale cuts included many agencies where women and people of color made up the majority of workers: for example, women made up over 60% of the workforce at agencies such as the Department of Education and the Department of Veterans Affairs, Health and Human Services; and Black workers made up a significant portion of the workforce at agencies such as the Department of Education and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

What is the NWLC doing about it?
We are definitely fighting back, along with a number of our partner organizations. One of our priorities is pushing back against the attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion, which are part of a broader attack by the federal government on civil rights enforcement as a whole. We've seen this administration trying to use DEI as a scapegoat to roll back those longstanding civil rights protections.

You mentioned EEOC.
The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is responsible for enforcing anti-discrimination laws in the workplace. It's an agency born out of the civil rights movement. It's more than 60 years old. But right now we're seeing the agency use its very limited resources to go after employers who are trying to advance equal opportunity in the workplace. It's basically turning the agency's entire mission on its head. It's trying to use the federal government to threaten private companies into dropping any practices that might support diversity and equity, even basic things like anti-bias and anti-harassment training.

And it seems to be working, doesn't it?
The agency is certainly getting its message out there. It is signaling to private companies that if they see too many women and people of color succeed in the workforce, it must be evidence of so-called "illegal DEI" and the federal government's going to come after you – and it is sowing confusion about what companies can and can't do. It does create a chilling effect that can scare companies into dropping programs that, in most cases, are lawful and help them build a more accessible and inclusive workforce.

I'm ticked when I see the stats and sift through the lies used to excuse such discrimination. I know you're a lawyer, and getting emotional won't solve anything. But what's your reaction to this stuff?
We can get pretty passionate here at the National Women's Law Center. It's hard not to be when it feels like everything is being turned upside down. If you look at just the building blocks like diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility — those are basic fundamental values that underlie our civil rights protections, but instead they are being used to undermine and attack those protections.

What's the National Women's Law Center doing to blunt this anti-DEI nonsense?
We're trying to use every tool in our toolbox to fight back. We're advocating in every way we can. For example, we're pushing back when the federal government misrepresents the law, and we are bringing lawsuits to hold the federal government accountable. And then we are reminding employers of what the law actually says and of their legal responsibility to ensure everyone has an equal opportunity.

But violators are saying, "Hey, the president says I don't have to do it."
That's a real challenge, right? The federal government is sending a message that it's not taking civil rights enforcement seriously. But it's important to remember that our civil rights laws still exist, and if companies don't take them seriously, there's still risk there. Even if the federal government isn't going to come after you for certain kinds of discrimination right now, that doesn't mean state enforcement agencies won't. That doesn't mean individual workers or groups of workers aren't still going to sue you to enforce their rights.

What other things are happening?
Another way we're fighting back is by trying to fill the gaps left by the federal government. So if the federal government is abandoning its duty to enforce certain civil rights protections, we're reminding people they still have those rights and trying to give them a way to enforce them. One example is that the National Women's Law Center houses the Legal Network for Gender Equity, which helps connect individuals who have experienced sex discrimination, including harassment at work or at school, with attorneys who will do a consultation. We are also challenging the administration's attacks on DEIA in court. We have filed lawsuits challenging new certifications that the administration has tried to impose on organizations that receive federal grants—including domestic violence and sexual assault organizations, housing and homelessness organizations, and organizations that help women access non-traditional occupations —that require them to certify they won't engage in diversity, equity, and inclusion. And we are a partner with the 75 Million Campaign, a coalition of organizations fighting for working women.

Despite the fact that the president controls all three branches of government and is imposing his will throughout the federal government, business, education, etc., you believe there's hope. Is that what you're telling me?
Absolutely, I think there are places where we can find hope, especially in the really large number of people who are fighting back. We're continuing to see workers organize, assert their power, and fight back. And we're seeing coalitions of organizations in the civil rights and gender justice space come together. As a movement, we really are pushing back. And we're stronger together than we are individually.

A win is a win — whenever, wherever. Is that sort of the strategy?
Wins take many forms: it can be stopping bad policies at the state level, new and exciting policies that can pass at the state level, or slowing down the harm at the federal level as much as we can.

BLACK LABOR WEEK PANEL SPOTLIGHTS BROTHERHOOD AND TRUTH

ICLS Hosts Event Created for Honesty, Accountability, and Understanding

Commentary by Anthony Hudson

There are few things more powerful on this earth than a group of Black men sitting across from each other, speaking truth without fear of retribution. In a society where people of color are scrutinized and examined closely at every turn, a deep conversation with another Black man who understands can often be a remedy for a sad heart.

The 2026 Black Labor Week Project Inc., an initiative founded by steelworker and activist Ephrin "EJ" Jenkins to enhance understanding between the labor movement and urban communities, recently held its Men's Discussion Panel at Morehouse College, hosted by its International Comparative Labor Studies (ICLS) program. Throughout the week in Atlanta, organizers focused on education and outreach by visiting schools and speaking with students about careers and opportunities in the skilled trades.

The panel discussion began with Dr. Cynthia Hewitt, the Avalon Professor of Sociology and director of the International Comparative Labor Studies program at Morehouse College, who addressed identity and political ideology, arguing that confronting the concept of "whiteness" is key to countering modern political divisions.

"The key is opening a fissure with ideological struggle over identity. As soon as a person rejects the moniker, "White," it creates an existential crisis in the group. Are we or are we not? I experienced the process as we went from Negro and Colored, to Black, to African." Hewitt said. "As a Black Power advocate, my politics includes a continuous referencing of the positive cultural and historical social contributions of African people."

Seven Black men who had never met before mirrored this redemptive thinking as they discussed their struggles without the burden of criticism. Each spoke on shared truths and mutual understanding.

"I think we (Black men) work hard," said Kenny Lewis, vice president of United Steelworkers Local 8888. "Society likes to say that we're lazy at times, but I have the opportunity to work around thousands of Black men each and every day doing what they need to provide for their families."

"I listen to this ratchet music, and I understand it's not the best, but it reflects my Southern culture," said Micah McClure, organizing director for the Black Male Initiative Georgia. "I also recognize that some of it needs to change. At the same time, I value how it allows us Black men to express themselves."

There is something deeply relatable about the Black male experience. Even without prior knowledge of one another, there was still immediate connection. Some parts of that experience — such as collective criminalization, the feeling of being judged for the actions of others, or navigating how one's identity is perceived in professional spaces — are often instantly recognized and understood.

The panelists spoke candidly about their personal shortcomings and maintained a truly mature tone, keeping accountability at the forefront. Moderator Dave Curtis, a health enthusiast and the owner of FitFamLife — a community-driven fitness movement that combines workouts, healthy living, and support to keep people active and motivated — played a major role in maintaining this tone. Curtis' questions not only pinpointed issues, but made it personal for each panelist to help the audience understand a Black man's perspective on what they're going through.

For example, when Curtis asked panelist and Chicago Public Schools English Instructor Jonathan Wilson how mass incarceration has shaped Black men's lives across generations, Wilson shared a story from his time teaching creative writing at Cook County Jail. He recalled "Dee," who at 18 was involved in a robbery that ended in a death and was sentenced to over 40 years.

By 23, Dee had earned his GED, became a published author and jail instructor, and had shown leadership and remorse. Wilson's account highlights how personal transformation often clashes with harsh systemic penalties. Research from the Sentencing Project, a nonprofit research organization that studies incarceration trends, shows that incarceration rates for Black Americans are five to eight times higher than for white Americans in many jurisdictions. This highlights the broader racial disparities faced by Black men in America.

"Yes, he committed a terrible harm on someone and a family, but one is left to ask, is there no road to redemption for him?" Wilson said. "He could be a teacher, or someone working with youth, helping them not make the mistakes he made. However, he will be sitting in a cell for 40 years. This is the fate of many Black men. While white youth get another chance, Black youth aren't given a road to redemption."

The Bureau of Justice Statistics, the main statistical agency of the U.S. Department of Justice, says Black adult males are imprisoned at a rate of approximately 2,382 per 100,000 adults, more than five times the rate of white men. Wilson's story, while deeply personal, reflects a disparity well documented in national data. The discussion also explored the realities of being a Black man in today's workforce, including the policies needed to drive meaningful change. Curtis asked panelist Jordan Easley, who is the organizing coordinator for the International Chemical Workers Union Council: "Do you believe more Black workers today are seeking to be organized in the workforce, and what actionable steps can allies and institutions take to dismantle these systems?" Easley noted that there is growing awareness around these issues and emphasized the importance of continued advocacy and action.

"I believe that the support for organizing is ascending due to the current administration's critical mass," Easley said. "Eyes are opening wider, in regard to the importance of economic benefits, protection from discrimination, and industry concentration. Allies and institutions are pivotal to organizing for labor unions — whether it's strengthening labor protections, improving enforcement of labor law, protecting gig and contract workers, and expanding public sector bargaining rights."

Anthony Hudson is a multimedia journalist with the La Porte County Herald-Dispatch *in Indiana.*

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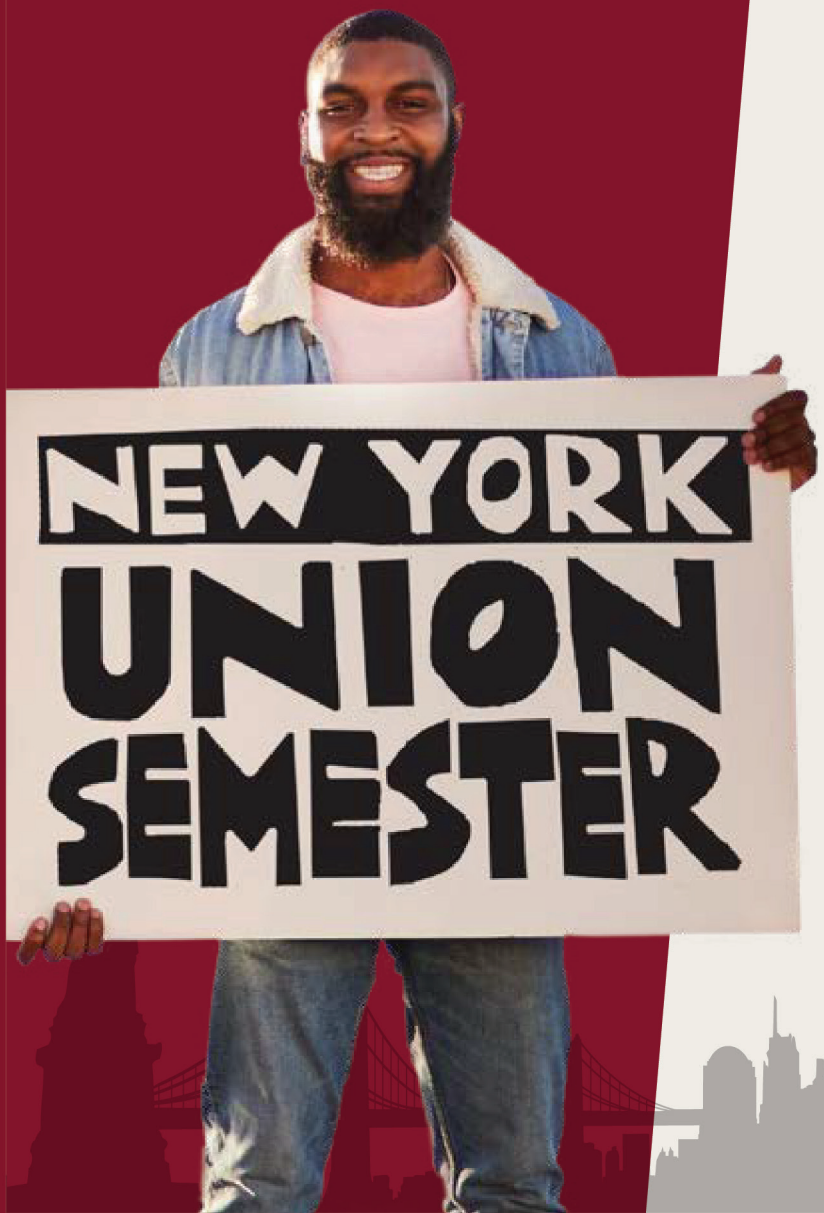

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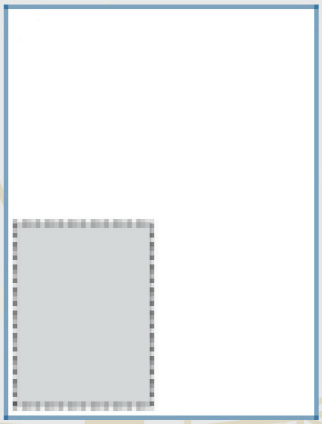

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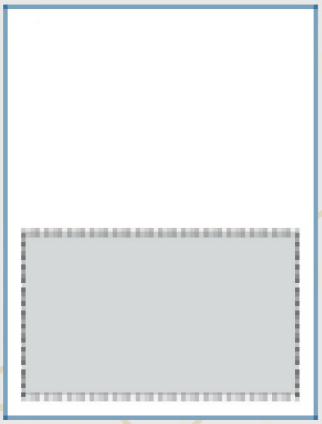

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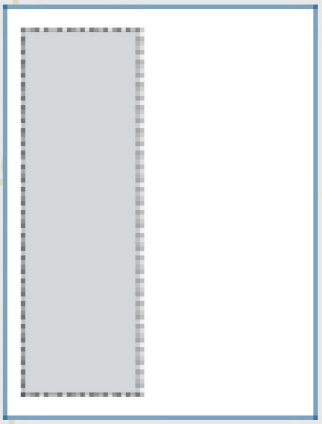

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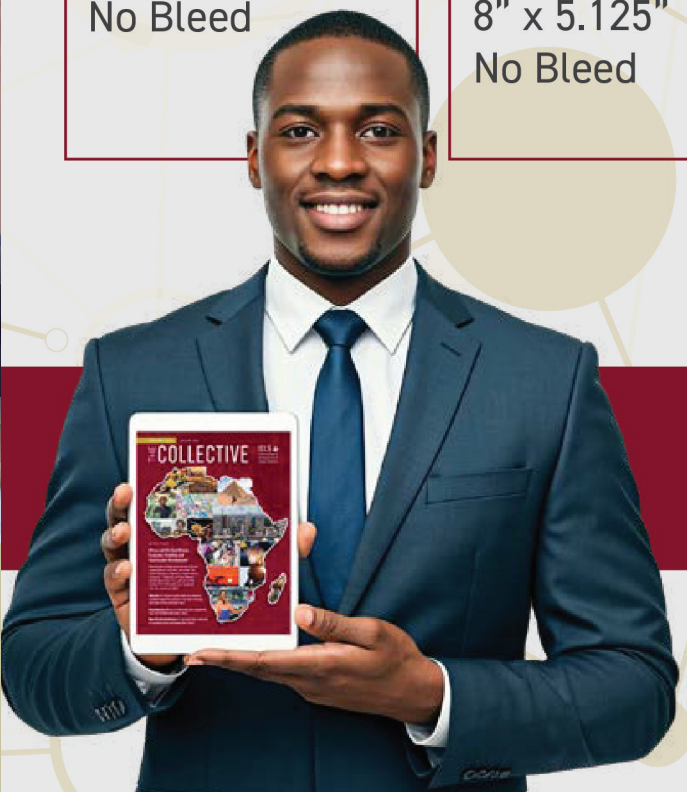

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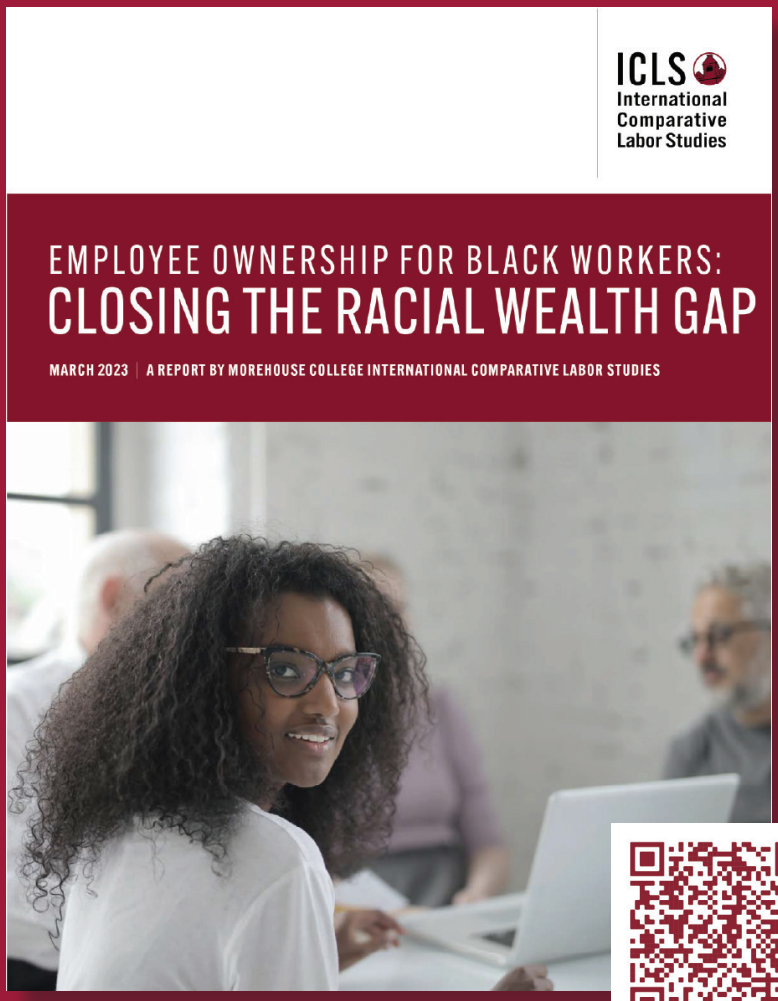

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