



Don't Stand Alone: Working Together and Sharing Stories of Black Labor Activism

Posted on January 2, 2026 by José Cotto

In light of current attacks on labor unions, Black history, academic freedom, and public humanities, we are grateful to be able to share the story of [*Don't Stand Alone: Black Labor Organizing in New Orleans*](#), a collaborative public history exhibit that made its debut in 2024 at Tulane University's Small Center for Collaborative Design. *Don't Stand Alone* is the product of years of community engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, student research projects, and professional academic review. Accompanied by a range of public programs, the exhibit continues to travel across the city, drawing large crowds at each stop. Its popularity reflects both our collaboration's protracted participatory development process and its resulting broad base in the community.

Research for the exhibit began years earlier when members of Stand with Dignity (a former project of the [*New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice*](#)) started digging into New Orleans's rich Black labor history in partnership with then-graduate student ethnographer [*Sarah Fouts*](#) and her class at Tulane University. The project survived multiple obstacles, most notably the Covid-19 pandemic, which put it on hold for several years.



Gregg Stafford, a member of the Black Men of Labor Social Aid & Pleasure Club, performs with his trio at the exhibit opening. Photograph by José Cotto.

However, through subsequent collaborative research and community building after the pandemic, our team produced a 14-panel traveling exhibit highlighting the history of Black labor organizing in the city. With a modest budget of pooled funding and small grants, an active community advisory board, teams of undergraduate and graduate students, in-house design expertise, and the inspired art of [Langston Allston](#), *Don't Stand Alone* traces the activism of Black workers over multiple generations and industries—from the 19th-century waterfront to 21st-century hotels and tourism.

Unions have always faced challenges in the South. Yet New Orleans has a long history of Black labor organizing. In the face of often violent opposition, Black New Orleanians drove campaigns for fair pay, equal access, and improved working conditions. They engaged in collective action, won hard-earned victories, and launched successful moments of interracial solidarity. In fact, Black workers in New Orleans led the fight against white supremacy and in favor of economic justice for all at every turn.



Exhibit artist Langston Allston (right) shares a happy moment with Tulane historian and project mover and shaker Jana Lipman, at the opening. Photograph by José Cotto.



Deacon John Moore, a longtime leader of the Musician's AFM 174-496, strikes a pose in front of the panel telling his union's history, at the opening. Courtesy Don't Stand Alone.

In our article in *LABOR*, "Behind the Scenes: *Don't Stand Alone: Black Labor Organizing in New Orleans*," we share the history of how Black domestic workers, teachers, sex workers, industrial workers, and others pushed for fair wages, racial equality, and well-being for the city's Black residents. These struggles were intertwined with civil rights protests and social justice campaigns, with Black labor leaders often on the front lines. Their acts of resistance - whether large or small - put cracks in the city's foundation of white supremacy, while their mass marches, strikes, and organizing campaigns showed that ordinary people can create a new, fairer world through collective action.

We also take *LABOR* readers on a journey into the process of collaborative exhibit making. This includes our research challenges, efforts to build community alliances and accountability, and the nuts and bolts—in some senses literally—of putting the finished product together.



Project co-founder and former Stand with Dignity lead organizer Alfred Marshall affectionately explains the panel on Storyville sex workers to a young child, at the opening. Photograph by José Cotto.



Left-to-right: historian Jesse Chanin, community activist Kalamu ya Salaam, Adrinda Kelly of Black Education New Orleans (BENOLA), and former UTNO president Jim Randels at a book launch panel for Chanin's *Building Power, Breaking Power: The United Teachers of New Orleans, 1965-2008* (University of North Carolina Press, 2024), on April 24, 2024. Photograph by Max Krochmal.

After its initial run at the Small Center, *Don't Stand Alone* traveled around the city. Throughout the 2024-25 school year, it held space in several branches of the New Orleans Public Library, from its main central location to outposts far from the French Quarter. It then moved to the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) Local 478 union hall and later was on display at the 2025 [Netroots Nation](#) conference, a massive gathering of progressive activists and politicians that took place in New Orleans. It is currently housed at the [Learning Commons in the Earl K. Long Library](#) at The University of

New Orleans.

Today, Black workers continue to spearhead the labor movement as a renewed force for democracy, racial justice, and economic opportunity for all. The struggle is ongoing. We hope these stories of New Orleans’s Black workers, activists, and visionaries—then and now—will inspire all of us for the future.

José Cotto, Artist, Designer, Educator

Max Krochmal, The University of New Orleans

Jana K. Lipman, Tulane University

Mary N. Mitchell, The University of New Orleans

M.G. Olson, New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice

Authors



• [José Cotto](#)

José Cotto is a photographer, designer, and artist. He was previously an instructor and Collaborative Design Project Manager at the Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design at the Tulane School of Architecture and Built Environment.



• [Max Krochmal](#)

Max Krochmal is Professor of History and the Director of Justice Studies at the University of New Orleans. He is past president of the Southern Labor Studies

Association and the author of *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Coalition in the Civil Rights Era*.



• [Jana K. Lipman](#)

Jana K. Lipman is Professor of History at Tulane University. She is the author of *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates* (University of California Press, 2020) and *Guantanamo: A Working-Class History between Empire and Revolution* (University of California Press, 2009).



• [Mary Niall Mitchell](#)

Mary Niall Mitchell is Ethel & Herman L. Midlo Endowed Chair and Gordon Mueller Professor of Public History at UNO, where she directs the Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies. She is the author of *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future After Slavery* (2008).



• [M. G. Olson](#)

M.G. Olson is a mixed methods researcher, policy analyst, and political educator. As Senior Researcher at the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice, he supports economic and racial justice campaigns centering low-income immigrant and Black workers' experiences.