

## Local 459 Perspective **Diversity Rights & Workers Rights** By: Jeff Fleming, Local 459 Representative

Occasionally, a member will ask why Local 459 is active in efforts to promote diversity in the work place. They wonder why their Union doesn't focus exclusively on filing grievances and negotiating better wages and benefits at the bargaining table.

Unions formed so that employees could band together to protect worker rights. Insuring everyone is treated fairly regardless of their background is a central part of this mission. There is a long history of the fight for civil rights being interwoven with the struggles for workers rights.

When King and other protestors were imprisoned for civil disobedience, labor Unions provided money to bail them out.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and organized labor formed a partnership in the 1960's when they realized how much their goals overlapped. King's famous "I have a dream" speech was part of an event organized with Unions officially titled "The march in Washington for Jobs and Freedoms". The UAW provided most of the logistical funding for the event.

One of King's last acts before his untimely death was to lend support to the striking 1300 sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. They were fighting to have the city recognize their right to form a Union. The police broke up a rally with tear gas and billy clubs, the mayor threatened to fire every striking employee, and a local court issued an injunction against further demonstrations. King agreed to help. He was assassinated as he was preparing to lead the strikers in a new march. The tremendous public pressure from his death soon forced the city administration to agree to the sanitation employees' first contract. The strikers' victory against heavy odds soon leads to other public employees winning the right to form a Union.

While Unions and King formed common cause in the 1960's, Local 459 also has a history of supporting the rights of a diverse work force at CMHA-CEI. In 1994, the Union bargaining team obtained contract language that went beyond civil rights protections in the law by prohibiting discrimination based on political affiliation and sexual orientation. Stewards have strengthened seniority right so employees have a fair chance for advancement regardless of their race or background. Members worked through the former Positive Action Plan committee to increase hiring of people of color in all CMHA-CEI programs. In 1999, the bargaining team negotiated the option for unmarried opposite sex or same sex couples to purchase additional insurance coverage for their partners. Local 459 uses local political candidates' views on civil rights issues to rate them on their support for issues important to working families. The Diversity Advisory Council was formed in part after Local 459 members presented concerns before the Board of Directors. This Union will continue to play an active role in partnership with the current administration in promoting diversity at all levels of CMHA-CEI.