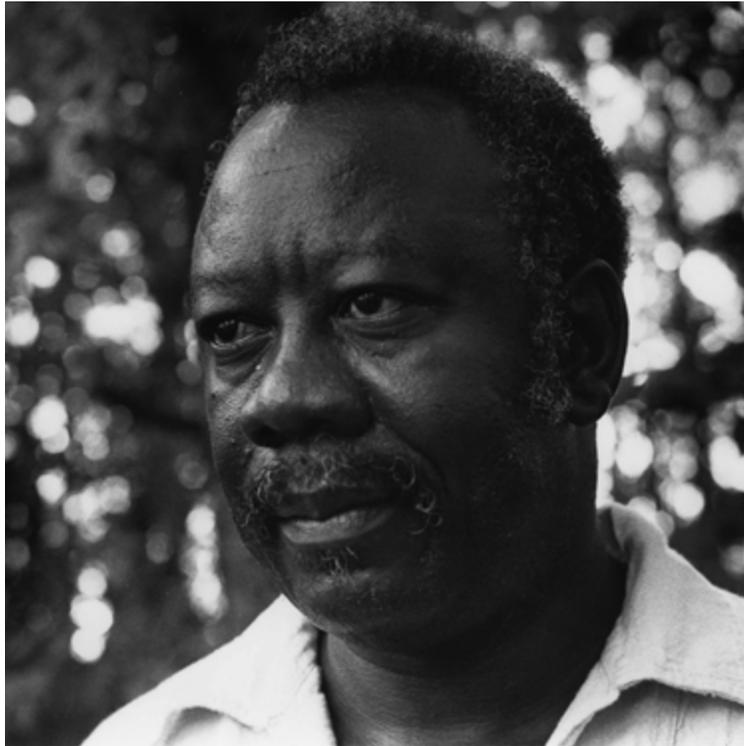


We Have the Power, We Can Do It: The Story of Bill Saunders

“You Got to Move” Shorts Discussion Guide * [Film link here](#) *



Background

“We have the Power; We can Do It” tells the story of Bill Saunders’ experiences with systemic racism and injustice, his time as a community organizer and his involvement with the 1969 hospital workers’ strike in Charleston, South Carolina.

450 workers at two Charleston, South Carolina hospitals went on strike in the spring of 1969, demanding equity for Black workers, health and safety protections and union recognition. The strikers were almost entirely women and worked at the Medical College Hospital of the University of South Carolina (MCH) and at Charleston County Hospital.

Black women workers at the hospitals, like Mary Moultrie, were at the center of the strike. “We are sick and tired of being sick and tired,” she declared, echoing civil rights champion Fannie Lou Hamer. She was among the more than 10,000 marchers at the 1969 Mother’s Day action when more than 100 people were arrested.

Early on, Moultrie and other fired workers approached Bill Saunders to support their struggle. Thanks to Saunders, Esau Jenkins, many students, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the 1199 labor union, the Charleston strike brought the labor and civil rights movements together in a uniquely powerful way.

Ultimately, the original 12 fired employees were reinstated, and the workers achieved wage increases of 30- 70 cents per hour and a grievance procedure. While union recognition was not achieved, those at the heart of the campaign note that the strike was not a failure and marked an important step towards Black women workers’ dignity and respect.

Today, Bill Saunders continues his community involvement. In recent years, he’s advocated for sanitation workers, founded COBRA (a sickle cell anemia program) and fought to keep John’s Island for the benefit of its residents (not for outside developers). He’s also been a radio host and a teacher, and served on the Public Service Commission of South Carolina from 1994-2004.

Learn About These Topics in the Film

More than anything, “We Have the Power, We Can Do It” is about becoming a community leader committed to empowering others and to cross-movement organizing.

It also touches on:

- Black Women Workers in the South
- Racism & Sexism in Healthcare Workplaces
- Linking the Civil Rights & Labor Movements
- Movement Building & Popular Education

Continuing the Conversation (select from these questions)

1. What inspired or surprised you about this story?
2. Bill Saunders shares that he's seen and been a part of many changes. What were these changes?
3. What are some of Saunders' memories of racism in his community as a child and young adult?
4. How did Saunders' white army colleagues react at the Columbia, SC bus station when he was told to exit the station and purchase a ticket 'around back'? How did Saunders process this experience?
5. What was the impact on Saunders of meeting people at the Highlander Center who'd already been organizing for many decades? What did he notice about the shifts in peoples' understanding of their own power?
6. What injustices were the hospital workers experiencing? How did they build their organization? What ended up forcing the workers to go on strike?
7. Why would the hospital administrator claim that the workers' struggle was not also a civil rights issue? How did Saunders and the strike leaders effectively illustrate that the Charleston strike was both a labor and civil rights struggle?
8. Why did Saunders and other leaders feel that the entire Black community needed to be included and brought in to support the workers' efforts?
9. How did Saunders end up viewing class & the division of poor Black and white workers?
10. In thinking about Saunders being involved with activism and community work for so many decades, how do you think he sustained this?
11. What did it mean for the workers in the film to realize that "we have the power; we can do it." How did they come to this understanding and how did it inform their strategy?

Connecting The Past & Present (select from these questions)

1. Do parts of the story of the 1969 Charleston hospital workers' strike remind you of any present-day struggles? How so (or not)?

2. Is this story similar to any historical struggles in your own community or region and/or anything you've been involved with?
3. In spite of not winning union recognition, what do you think the workers and the Black community achieved? How do you balance specific campaign goals with long-term movement building in your own work today?
4. A Charleston strike leader shared that they “won recognition as human beings...” How might this echo or form the foundation for today’s social movement demands (by Black Lives Matter, the Poor People’s Campaign &/or others)?
5. Saunders shared that the entire city of Charleston was closed down for 100 days and that businesses began to realize that they were ‘vulnerable to poor people.’ What can we learn and apply from boycotts during this period? What might be different today (and require additional strategies)?
6. What other lessons from the film (the role of music, press, media, coalition building, popular education, etc) could you utilize in your own unions and/or community organizations?
7. Are there any songs you can share that have come out of present-day movement struggles?
8. If you could ask Bill Saunders and/or the strike leaders one question, what would it be?
9. What is something you’d like to learn more about?
10. Who else could you share this film with?
11. Is there a problem or issue that you would like to see changed, or something that people are already working on that you could join?
12. Are there people in your community or organization whose stories, like Bill Saunders’, are important to learn about and share? How might this happen?

Additional Resources: Learn More

[Highlander Center Research & Education Center](#)

[An 1199 Strike That Shook the South \(1199 SEIU’s Journal\)](#)

[Oral History \(Video\) Interview w Bill Saunders \(Library of Congress\)](#)

[Oral History \(Audio\) Interview w Mary Moultrie \(Library of Congress Civil Rights History Project\)](#)

[From Occupy Charleston to the 1969 Hospital Strike](#)