

American Rights at Work Honors Cromwell, United Streetcar and Founders

by James Parks, Jun 25, 2011
AFL-CIO NOW Blog

The voice of America's workers and middle class rang out loud and clear at the 7th Annual American Rights at Work (ARAW) Awards Celebration earlier this week in Washington, D.C.

Kimberly Freeman Brown, American Rights at Work executive director, set the theme of the evening when she said to the 400 participants, "Our aim is to show the Wisconsin teacher and the Washington machinist that they are not alone."

Bo McCurry, president of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 2143 in Sparta, Tenn., described life on the frontlines in the battle to save America's middle class. His plant has been repeatedly honored as productive and effective. Yet the employer, Dutch multinational Philips Lighting, is closing the plant and shipping those jobs to Mexico. McCurry said:

"We've got to think about our trade laws and what we're doing to protect our interests here. If we're going to have a future at all, we've got to tell our children that making things in this country is important. We need manufacturing jobs. We've earned our place in the global competition and we're willing to keep improving and keep competing, but when we do that and then have it yanked from us, well that's just a kick in the head."

In contrast to Philips, Oregon's United Streetcar, one of the recipients of the evening's Eleanor Roosevelt Human Rights Awards, was honored as an example for other businesses to emulate.

Through a labor-management partnership with the IBEW and the Ironworkers, United Streetcar has revived a clean-energy industry in the United States.

Another honoree, actor and activist James Cromwell, has been a longtime supporter of fair employment practices, standing in picket lines with grocery store workers and serving on the boards of the Screen Actors (SAG) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA). He also has appeared in commercials promoting a documentary attacking Wal-Mart.

The final honorees of the evening were the organizations and individuals who founded American Rights at Work. Accepting the award on behalf of the founders was Larry Cohen, president of the Communications Workers of America (CWA), who was joined on stage by his fellow founders and workers from across the country, including new union members at Piedmont Airlines.