



2025 / 2026

EMERGING LEADERS



RUTGERS-NEW BRUNSWICK

**Center for Innovation
in Worker Organization**

School of Management and Labor Relations



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

*Kalmanovitz Initiative
for Labor and the Working Poor*

PARTICIPANTS BIOS

Britney Cooke Britney joined the Climate Organizing Hub in 2023 as a Digital Campaign Strategist. Britney Cooke is an experienced organizer and cultural worker dedicated to grassroots activism, popular education, and community empowerment. Previously, she worked as the Digital Organizer for Florida Rising, a statewide voting rights and grassroots organizing group in Florida working to build power in Black and brown communities, growing their digital audience by 204%. In 2019, Britney joined Fempower Miami, a collective of queer feminists

fighting fascism through cultural confrontations in Miami. She then went on to join the Dream Defenders, continuing her dedication to grassroots movement building and using art as a revolutionary tool in the digital space. She continued her work in communications as a Digital Strategist on the project V-Day's "Voices" by Aja Monet, an art project for all women by Black women, and as an Outreach Coordinator for Belly of the Beast, "The War on Cuba," an award-winning documentary series that takes an in-depth look at the economic war waged by the U.S. government on the Cuban people. Britney was born in Savanna-La-Mar, Westmoreland, Jamaica, and raised in South Florida. She attended the University of Central Florida, where she received a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, a certificate in Gender Studies, and a Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies: Diversity and Inclusion.



Denisha Jordan My name is Denisha Jordan. I believe that my purpose on this earth is to advocate for students and marginalized communities. I am a 24-year veteran teacher. Teaching is a second career for me. I chose to become an educator because I wanted to have a positive impact on the lives of students. During my first 10 years working in public education, I realized that the system needed to change and that I needed to be doing more for our students. I saw a pathway for change within my union, so I

became an active leader in my union. I have appreciated being able to do racial & social advocacy work in my role, and help create and advocate for inclusive and supportive policies that aim to help students, educators, and communities thrive. I volunteer as a mentor for youth organizers and community organizations that fight to provide affordable housing, living wages, and support for immigrant populations. I am also very proud and humbled to be a Human Rights Award recipient for my advocacy and support for LGBTQIA+ students. In addition to my work as an educator and advocate, I am a Mom of a daughter and 3 sons. My Mother is the person that I admire most in this world, and my greatest heartache was the loss of my Dad a few years ago. I understand that our time on this earth is limited, and I am committed to living each day to its fullest, without regret, and in service to our children's future. I believe that everything happens for a reason and that karma always prevails.

PARTICIPANTS BIOS

Georgia Flowers Lee I use the name Georgia Flowers Lee, and I was born in Belize. I moved to New York with my family at age 13 and then to Los Angeles where I now live. Teaching is my second career. I spent 12 years as an investigator with the California State Bar looking into cases of attorney misconduct. I started teaching as a substitute teacher in 2000. From the start, something clicked for me in the classroom, and I discovered a passion working with special needs students. My entire LAUSD career has been at one school — Saturn

Elementary — with students on the Autism spectrum in preschool and primary classes. I was raised in a household where the struggle for social justice, racial justice, and equity was front and center. Coming from a colonial system that was locked in the struggle for independence, I know that collective action is the only way to balance the scales in an unequal society. On day one, when I signed my teaching contract, I also signed my UTLA membership card. My involvement with UTLA deepened when the school's chapter chair hand-picked me as her successor, going as far as filling out the Chapter Chair Election form and handing it to me. I insisted on an election anyway because democracy matters. I ran unopposed. I then moved on to UTLA cluster leader, steering committee, Board of Directors member, and West Area Chair before being elected UTLA NEA Vice President in 2023. I am inspired daily by UTLA member solidarity and how we use our megaphone for people who don't have a voice. I believe that UTLA's greatest strength is our willingness to stand in the gap for the most vulnerable in our communities. I take pride in the collective action — from the 2019 strike to the 2023 Solidarity strike — that has delivered significant wins for educators and the families we serve.



Jasmine Payne-Paterson is a senior state policy strategist at the Economic Policy Institute. An advocate for removing systemic barriers, she seeks to identify opportunities to combat intergenerational poverty, bolster socioeconomic mobility, and increase equity.. Payne-Patterson has experience conducting research and advocating at the local, state, and federal levels, holding positions at many nonprofits, government agencies, and campaigns. Previously, she worked at the United States House of Representatives, the Congressional Black

Caucus Foundation, CARE, the Atlanta Community Food Bank, and several other community-centered organizations. Committed to community involvement, Payne-Patterson has served on various boards, including as the vice chair of the Georgia Piedmont Technical College Foundation board of trustees and formerly as the president of her homeowner's association. Believing that everyone can be a catalyst for change, she believes that "we are the ones that we have been waiting for." Her favorite activities are whatever makes her seven-month baby, Naomi's smile.

PARTICIPANTS BIOS



Kenya Slaughter is a nationally recognized labor organizer and justice advocate, born in Oakland, California, with deep roots in Louisiana through her paternal side. Now based in Louisiana, Kenya organizes low-wage workers—particularly in the retail sector—to fight for safety, dignity, and better working conditions. Her advocacy has gained national attention, with features in CNN and the New York Times spotlighting her leadership in the movement for workers' justice. A former Dollar General worker herself, Kenya brings firsthand experience, unshakable integrity

and radical empathy to her organizing. She is a rank-and-file leader who facilitates Know Your Rights training, builds worker committees, and supports the development of new organizers across the South. As a Black woman and autism mom, Kenya's intersectional approach is rooted in lived experience and a fierce love for her community. She believes deeply in collective power, the importance of vision and imagination in movement work, and creating space for marginalized voices to be heard and honored. Kenya is currently strengthening her leadership through national fellowships and continued education. She is proud to join the WE Emerging Leaders Cohort, where she looks forward to building alongside others committed to transformative change, equity, and liberation.

Maria Lupe Canales Born in Tamazulita Jalisco, 1971, migrated to the US when I was 8 years old, graduated high school at 16 years old, became a mother and a wife at 17 years old, have 4 children from this marriage, escape after 12 years of being mistreated and abused. Suffered a heart attack, stroke heart surgery at 43 and Now I set the example to my son and daughters that we can achieve anything with God.



Merra Swoverland I am 41 years old. I was born in Hayward, CA. I am Korean-American and grew up in Concord, CA, where I was one of the very few East Asians attending my elementary, middle, and high schools. I attended college in Riverside, CA where I met my husband and have lived in Southern California ever since. I live in Orange County with my husband and two children. I have worked in labor as support staff since 2008. I am currently the Director of Operations at AFSCME Local 3299.

PARTICIPANTS BIOS

Nichole Foster is a proud member of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe from Southwest Colorado, raised by their mother from the Diné Nation. They identify as Two-Spirit and use all pronouns, honoring the fluidity and sacredness of their identity as part of their cultural and personal truth. Nichole's journey has been rooted in community care and advocacy from the beginning. They spent years serving their tribe through the Recreation Center and Human Resources Department, and later as director of a youth shelter, where they worked closely with parents



and youth to help preserve family unity and provide tools for long-term stability. After spending some time in college, Nichole found their calling in the trades, graduating from trade school in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In 2016, they moved to Denver and trained with both the Boilermaker and Carpenter Locals. During this time, Nichole remained a vocal advocate for the struggles of Indigenous people, while also navigating the layered challenges of being a Queer Woman of Color in a traditionally male dominated and often exclusionary industry. These experiences ultimately led them to shift paths—still within the labor movement, but now with a focus on systemic change. Nichole is now proud to be a part of Colorado Jobs With Justice (COJWJ), where they are excited and empowered to help create meaningful change in the building trades. Their advocacy is focused on uplifting the voices and needs of BIPOC queer women, fighting for equity, and pushing for structural transformation in spaces that have long excluded them.



Norma Uriostegui is an organizer and trainer at the Miami Workers Center. She is leading domestic worker organizing projects, as well as leading the development of structures and training for the leadership development of MWC members. She is the daughter of working-class Mexican immigrants, and their experience, along with many others like them, is the source of her motivation and purpose in organizing to build power with workers to win the rights and respect they deserve. She also enjoys cooking, video games, and hands-on art projects.

PARTICIPANTS BIOS

Summer Govern currently serves as a fellow of the Advancing Black Strategies Initiative, working with the United Southern Service Workers Union (USSW) on their Waffle House campaign in Atlanta, GA. With a deep-rooted commitment to social justice, Summer brings a multidimensional approach to her work—blending organizing, research, creative direction, and event planning to strengthen movement ecosystems across the South. She has previously worked as a community organizer for GA STAND-UP, where she supported civic engagement initiatives and grassroots coalition building.



Her experience also includes care work as a postpartum doula, reflecting her dedication to holistic community support and reproductive justice. Summer's advocacy is grounded in building worker power through a research lens, with a keen ability to translate data and lived experiences into actionable strategies. She is a mobilizer, strategist, and connector—often working to increase engagement across communities and institutions to form resilient networks and transformative campaigns.

In addition to her organizing and research skills, Summer brings a creative vision to her work, having led visual storytelling efforts and supported the planning of rallies, teach-ins, cultural events, and political education series. Her creative direction helps shape accessible, powerful messaging that resonates with working-class audiences and amplifies frontline voices. Her volunteer history includes work with the A. Philip Randolph Institute's food bank, multi-campus organizing through the Planned Parenthood Action Fund, voter engagement efforts, and sustained participation in various community organizations. Summer previously served as an apprentice on the research team at Jobs With Justice, where she deepened her knowledge of economic justice, expanded bargaining strategies, and coalition-based organizing.



Tia Banks is a Senior Organizer with Service Employees International Union. Raised in Virginia, Tia has witnessed firsthand both the resilience of Southern workers and the structural barriers they face. She began organizing in her home state, where she has helped lead campaigns to win collective bargaining rights for public sector workers and build strong member-led unions in workplaces that have long been denied a voice. With experience organizing across sectors, including healthcare, public services, and higher education, Tia brings a grounded and strategic approach to her work. Her organizing is shaped by a belief that the South is not a lost cause, but the future of the labor movement.

She is deeply invested in building tenacious infrastructure, and advancing campaigns that not only win contracts but more importantly shift power. Outside of her work, Tia is an avid reader who finds inspiration in stories of resilience. She also loves to travel and explore new places, drawing connections between movements across the world and the fight for justice here in the South. Most recently, she has found a new love for practicing yoga as a way to stay grounded and present while navigating the highs and lows of movement work.

PARTICIPANTS BIOS



Yiran Zhang is a Strategic Researcher at Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1. She has been in the labor movement for nearly 9 years, starting as a member organizer, winning her first union with her graduate student coworkers, then becoming a full-time organizer herself before transitioning into the role of a strategic researcher. Her work supports diverse organizing & contract campaigns in the property service sector across the Midwest and

strives to weave racial, environmental, immigrant, and LGBTQ+ justice into worker & economic justice. In addition to providing strategic campaign and research support, Yiran leads Local 1's environmental justice work, is an executive board member of the Asian & Pacific Islander Caucus, and serves on the Racial Justice Committee and Lavender Caucus to connect the union's many justice fights.

Zheniah Houston is a community organizer, artist, and entrepreneur based in Los Angeles, California. Born and raised in LA, she holds dual degrees in Public Relations and American Studies from Rowan University in New Jersey. As the lead organizer at the Los Angeles Black Worker Center, Zheniah works at the intersection of advocacy and empowerment, building pathways for Black workers to thrive. Outside of organizing, Zheniah is an alternative R&B singer, songwriter, and visual artist who draws inspiration from her roots, community, and everyday Black joy. Her dreams are bold—she aspires to be a serial entrepreneur who creates opportunities for Black folks, invests in their leadership, and supports Black-owned businesses as an angel investor. Her next big move: opening her own café next year. At the center of it all? Liberation, love, and her cat, “I.”





WILL
EMPOWER

