



TUESDAY, JANUARY 16, 2007

## King ceremony inspires workers

**Myron Pitts**

They walked in a line, carrying signs and singing, very appropriately, “We Shall Overcome.”

The ceremony to unveil the statue of civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr. was just under way. Emcee Jonathan Charleston could just barely be heard in the back rows by people sitting and standing near the covered statue.

People heard the singing clearly as the marchers walked up between the trees, over a creek and up to the site. Some folks shushed them.

The marchers had walked the three-quarters mile in fine weather from a service honoring King at First Baptist Church on Moore Street.

They were black and Latino, mirroring the work force at the world’s largest hog-killing plant in Tar Heel. They had skipped work in protest of the company not giving them time off for the Martin Luther King holiday, which coincided this year with King’s actual birthday.

When they reached the ceremony, they stopped singing. Most mingled in to hear people talk about a man who fought for the kinds of rights for which they are fighting for now.

Others stood in small groups off to the side with their family members, co-workers and members of United Food and Commercial Workers, which has for years been trying to organize workers against bitter resistance from management.

Their yellow T-shirts on the front read, “Justice, witness, at Smithfield.”

The backs read: “Justicia, testigo, a Smithfield.”

Rafael Hernandez stood with co-workers and union reps Monday. He has worked at the plant for nine years, and his normal job is to rotate the hanging hog carcasses.

“It takes a lot of strength,” says the stout Hernandez through a translator. “And a lot of movement.”

He hurt his hand and his back and is now on lighter duty. He says Smithfield had started paying the bills for his recovery but has since stopped.

Through a translator, he said coming to stand with his co-workers was important.

Julio Vargas agreed. He is a former employee, now a union member, who was fired during a work stoppage in 2003.

“We wanted to show support for Martin Luther King,” he said through a translator. “He was a person who was fighting for workers’ rights and justice 50 years ago.

“People are still getting discriminated against and stepped on.”

King, shortly before his death, had switched the focus of his civil rights efforts to the poor and to workers’ rights.

Nationwide, Latinos and black Americans are more and more sharing the same neighborhoods and working alongside each other. Latinos are slowly occupying economic rungs that many blacks have left, but not all.

On the floor at the Smithfield plant, the mostly Latino work force is led by a corps of all-black supervisors.

There is sometimes tension, said Tracy Smith, who has been working the Smithfield “kill floor” for three years.

But she says that is mostly because of the disconnect between young supervisors and older workers.

She described the work force at Smithfield as “75 percent” Hispanic.

She said the King ceremony was important to attend because none of the Smithfield workers would have had jobs without him.

Monday’s ceremony illustrated the similarity between the present struggles of Latinos, legal and illegal, and the 1960s-era struggles of African-Americans.

At the First Baptist service earlier, the program featured the images of King and labor advocate Cesar Chavez.

Adam Beyah, who walked over from the church, said he was moved by watching two Hispanic girls walking and chanting, “We want justice.”

“It threw me back to when I was 12 or 13, marching in High Point,” he says. “If African-Americans cannot find solidarity in that — something is dead.”

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