

Sunday, February 18, 2024

Today we celebrate Black History Month. This week's theme is Black History Achievements in Social Justice among Young Activists.

The St. James Presbyterian Church's Black History Month Planning Committee recognizes

Erica Smiley.

Erica Smiley is the executive director of Jobs With Justice. A long-time organizer and movement leader, Smiley has been spearheading strategic organizing and policy interventions for Jobs With Justice for nearly 15 years. Prior to taking up her current position with the organization, Smiley served as organizing director for Jobs With Justice developing campaigns that resulted in transformative changes to how working people organize and are civically engaged at their workplaces and in their communities. During her tenure at Jobs With Justice, Smiley has served in numerous leadership capacities including as organizing director and as senior field organizer for the southern region.

Serving as one of the lead architects, Smiley has been instrumental in developing the strategic vision of Jobs With Justice to build power for impacted working people through expanding their collective bargaining power as one way to redefine and claim their democracy, while addressing issues of inequality and poverty. This includes founding the Advancing Black Strategists Initiative and co-convening a national strategy for essential workers.

She co-authored [The Future We Need: Organizing for Economic Democracy in the Twenty First Century](#), a book on collective bargaining and democracy with Sarita Gupta, released in April 2022. She has also authored several related articles in the New Labor Forum, Dissent Magazine, the Journal on Class, Race and Corporate Power, The Labor Education and Research Association (LERA), and other publications lifting strategic organizing, movement building, direct action, and discourse as core strategies for advancing work in this arena. She was awarded a Bellagio Fellowship and Residency from the Rockefeller Foundation in 2023. As one of the few queer black women leaders in the labor movement, Smiley has helped to seed numerous initiatives that position and prioritize the demands and voices of vulnerable working people in socio-economic and political decisions that directly and indirectly impact their individual lives, families, and communities. As a seasoned organizer she has been a vocal advocate for mobilizing our movements to be aligned around a common agenda for working families.

Prior to joining Jobs With Justice, Smiley organized with community groups and unions such as the Tenants and Workers Support Committee (now Tenants and Workers United) in Virginia and SEIU Local 500 in Baltimore. Her career in social and economic justice began in the reproductive justice field, serving as national field director for Choice USA (now United for Reproductive and Gender Equity—URGE) where she received the Young Women of Achievement Award in 2004.

Her passion for advancing innovations that prioritize the South is evident on the boards she serves on today and in the past, which includes the board of the Highlander Research and Education Center, based in Tennessee, a catalyst for grassroots organizing and movement building in Appalachia and the South and the leadership council of the Workers Defense Project based in Texas. Additionally, she is on the board of the SEIU Education and Support Fund, the Workers Lab, and she participates in the Bargaining for the Common Good advisory committee. In 2021, she was appointed by the Board of Governors at

Rutgers University to sit on the State Advisory Committee for the School of Management and Labor Relations.

Smiley is originally from Greensboro, N.C., where she is a proud product of public schools—ultimately graduating from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She currently resides in New Jersey alongside her partner, Amanda, and their daughter.