



**John L. Lewis**  
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**A Biography**  
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# Shanna Peeks

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***“I have to understand what your needs are first, then we can work together.”***

Young labor activist reflects on joining labor’s rich legacy and her approach to organizing

*Shanna Peeks almost was not a labor activist. After graduating with a degree in social work and psychology from Salisbury University, she found herself at the crossroads of pursuing a graduate degree in social work or finding a job. An aunt who works for the UMWA, a union of nearly 75,000 members, suggested that Peeks fill in for a secretary who was on leave, Peeks took the temporary job and never left. One short-term assignment led to another until she eventually landed her current position in UMWA’s Organizing Department.*

*The Washington, DC, native started with limited knowledge about unions, but she quickly developed a deep appreciation for UMWA and the labor movement’s rich history—including its involvement in the civil rights movement. Once she learned of the benefits that labor had secured for workers, such as the 40-hour workweek that many take for granted, her interest in staying with UMWA grew.*

*Today, Peeks proudly works to bring more workers into UMWA. And not all of those workers are mineworkers. In addition to its history of protecting mineworkers who perform some of the most dangerous work in the nation, UMWA also represents healthcare workers, truck drivers, manufacturing workers and public employees across the United States and Canada.*

*Peeks’ story reminds us of the importance of attracting talented millennials of diverse backgrounds into the labor movement. Doing so must start with making sure that unions and the broader labor movement is more visible in their communities.*

Coming up, I didn't really know too much about unions. I'm from Washington, DC. My mom worked for the fire department and so did my grandfather, so I knew about hard work. But as far as unions or the civil rights movement, it's just not something that we talked about at the dinner table.

Even at school, I don't remember unions being a part of the books that we had to read. They just weren't a part of my world. And it's crazy because a lot of the benefits that I have, I didn't even know that they exist because of the labor movement.

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***Because without numbers, you don't have a union.***

I didn't come into the union knowing that this was something that I was going to do. I was helping out while they were waiting for their secretary to come back. But as I got more into it and started really researching the history of the Mine Workers, it became something that I really wanted to become a part of. I learned and found out so much about the history of the union and the labor movement—for example UMWA President John L. Lewis and Mother Jones. It was a history that I wanted to be a part of.

I work in the Organizing Department. And to me, it's the heart. Because without numbers, you don't have a union. So being in that department, we try to get more people into the union, and we also try to find out the needs of our members and the things that we can do to help. Any job

problems that our members are having, we pretty much take on that part of it.

You meet a lot of different people. If you have a question about wanting to be a mine worker, this is the department that you would come to first. I get to meet a lot of different people that work in coal mining. And their issues are different than mine. Most of the time, they come from smaller towns and pretty much their whole livelihood is the mine. But we are all still connected.

We have the international office and we have district offices. And we have leaders in these communities that we train to see what the community needs. It's very important that their needs are first. Sometimes, you want to talk about work, but right now they have to feed their children. So if I feed you, maybe then we can have a discussion about what you want to see at a job. I have to understand what your needs are first, and then we can work together on a common goal that hopefully will benefit your life.

Coal is one aspect of what we do. But we are more than that. We actually represent a lot of people who are not coal miners. We have parole officers. And we have members from the Navaho Nation, which has a number of different lines of work—blue collar and white collar. So I think

if we're trying to organize people who are not coal miners, first it is about education—letting them know that we do represent more than coal miners. Because if a person feels like you can't relate to them, then how are you going to represent them if you don't know their struggle?

So that's the important thing first: to educate them about our history with workers who are not coal miners. Then we go in and make sure that it's something that they really want. A lot of times you might get really mad at your boss on a particular day, and the next week everything's fine. So it's basically trying to figure out if there is really a need and if the whole organization is going to come together and try to form the union.

Once we make our own assessment, then we make house calls and talk to the workers to see how they are being taken advantage of and what their needs and demands are. Once that's done, we try to get them to vote for a union by following the labor laws. And once that's done and we're able to get a contract, that's pretty much how we come in.

What's most important is talking to these communities first. It's hard to try to tell people what they need or what they want if you don't talk to them.