I used to work as a janitor at Robert Woodruff Volunteer Center Building also known as the United Way building in Atlanta, Georgia, from the late 1980s to early 2000s. I know how hard it is to survive on minimum wage and a few cents more. I used to work part-time in the evenings from 5:00 to 9:00. I cleaned the offices on the 14th floor vacuuming, dusting, and emptying the trash. I have always been a fantastic cleaner and I enjoyed my job. I had no benefits. So if I got sick and had to take a day off, it was a day without pay. I was making only $6.25 an hour. Sometimes, I didn’t have enough money to buy food and clothes for my family. I had to supplement my pay with welfare benefits. Sometimes, I had to borrow food and money from my family and neighbors. No one who works hard every day of the week should have to live like that.

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I am thankful for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the workers in Atlanta who came before me. They started the Justice for Janitors campaign. They took part in a one-day strike, and they signed union cards. Those brave workers took a chance at being fired when they participated in the one-day strike. According to an SEIU report, there were about 1,300 mostly black women like me who were working in downtown Atlanta office buildings. Since most of the workers were part-time and paid a little over minimum wage a lot of the workers had to work at other jobs or depend on welfare, like I did, to survive. Those peaceful demonstrations made the public aware of the janitors’ working conditions. We had the support of Coretta Scott King and Rev. Jesse Jackson, and Mayor Andrew Young mediated talks between the Justice for Janitors staff and building owners.

So when I came along in 1989, all I had to do after a 90-day probation period was sign up for the union. Some think unions cause more problems than solutions, but they help to provide better working conditions and training to learn how to use cleaning chemicals safely. And the union shop stewards help janitors get the respect that they deserve by making sure that employers stick to the contract. When I was working as a janitor, even though we had a union, we still weren’t making a living wage. Janitors continue to help businesses thrive. Therefore, they should be paid a living wage for all their hard work. The fight continues!

Carolyn Holt is a student at Literacy Action, Inc., in Atlanta, Georgia. She was born and raised in Palmetto, GA. She grew up in a foster home and graduated high school with a Special Ed. diploma. She has two daughters and two granddaughters. Her oldest granddaughter is a senior attending Georgia State University.

Justice for Janitors
SEIU is responsible for the Justice for Janitors campaign nationwide. It was one of the most successful labor organizing efforts of the past 25 years. Since 1990, Justice for Janitors has won dozens of contracts with commercial cleaning contractors and organizing over 225,000 janitors throughout the United States and Canada.

United We Stand
According to the author, what is helpful about having a union? Infer how it would be different if she were not in the union.

Read the article on p. 8 by Darcell Hines. Tell her story in your own words, noticing especially where she shifted from feeling alone and scared to feeling empowered.

In your own experience, what are the advantages and disadvantages of negotiating alone vs. with others? Have you been in a union? What worked well in the union? What did not work well?