

READING

Petition from the Colored Washerwomen

In the years following Emancipation, the vast majority of Black women worked as domestics for white families and were charged with duties such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and laundry. In 1866, Black women laundry workers joined together to protest low wages in the city of Jackson, Mississippi. In this petition sent to the city's mayor, the laundry workers pledged to offer a uniform rate in exchange for the services.

Jackson, Mississippi
June 20, 1866.
To Mayor Barrows

Dear Sir:—At a meeting of the colored Washerwomen of this city, on the evening of the 18th of June, the subject of raising the wages was considered, and owing to many circumstances, the following preamble and resolution were unanimously adopted:

Whereas, under the influence of the present high prices of all the necessaries of life, and the attendant high rates of rent, while our wages remain very much reduced, we, the washerwomen of the city of Jackson, State of Mississippi, thinking it impossible to live uprightly and honestly in laboring for the present daily and monthly recompense, and hoping to meet with the support of all good citizens, join in adopting unanimously the following resolution:

Be it resolved by the washerwomen of this city and county, That on and after the foregoing date, we join in charging a uniform rate for our labor, that rate being an advance over the original price by the month or day the statement of said price to be made public by printing the same, and any one belonging to the class of washerwomen, violating this, shall be liable to a fine regulated by the class. We do not wish in the least to charge exorbitant prices, but desire to be able to live comfortably if possible from the fruits of our labor.

We present the matter to your Honor, and hope you will not reject it as the condition of prices call on us to raise our wages. The prices charged are: \$1.50 per day for washing \$15.00 per month for family washing \$10.00 per month for single individuals.

We ask you to consider the matter in our behalf, and should you deem it just and right, your sanction of the movement will be gratefully received. Yours, very truly, THE WASHERWOMEN OF JACKSON.¹

¹ "First Collective Action of Black Women Workers," Jackson Daily Clarion, June 24, 1866, in *The Black Worker: A Documentary History from Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978-1984).