

**Hayward Activists hope to stamp out poverty
'March to Save the Soul of America' unites labor, church and social agitators in
quest to end hunger, homelessness**

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HAYWARD – Banners blew, pastors preached and activists organized in Weekes Park on Thursday afternoon as 40 people gathered to propose solutions to what they called a “growing epidemic of poverty in America.”

Sponsored by the Women's Economic Agenda Project of Oakland, the gathering is part of an eight-day “March to Save the Soul of America” as WEAP visits hot spots of poverty throughout the Bay Area in San Jose, Hayward, Oakland, Vallejo and Richmond.

Ethel Long-Scott, WEAP's executive director, said the tour is intended to link labor, church and social activists in a national movement to end hunger, homelessness and poor education. As people shared success and failure stories of homelessness and drug addiction, some listeners signed up to join WEAP's Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign. The campaign endorses a federal proposal called “Just Health Care” that would provide all U.S. residents with medical care from birth to death, and the Labor Party's “Right to a Job Campaign.”

“The leaders of our country are not addressing the common economic plight, so we are going to have to provide solutions,” Long-Scott said as the banners were taken down and folded up, to be unfurled today at St. Mary's Center in Oakland.

“Our rights have been violated for over 54 years in this country, and we are saying no to these violations,” said WEAP member Andre Dawkins, referring to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights signed by the United States and other countries in 1948. The declaration outlines right to food, clothing, housing, education and medical care.

The Rev. John Wichman, pastor of Westminster Hills Presbyterian Church, one of seven churches that make up the South Hayward Parish, spoke to the crowd, saying he hopes WEAP's visit marks the beginning of a larger, multi-community struggle.

“It's good to see that we are not alone in our struggle against poverty and violence here in south Hayward, because this is definitely not an isolated thing,” Wichman said.

He said the Weekes Park neighborhood itself is an example of how people can change things.

“This park has a reputation in the late '70s and early '80s as a drug market, but this neighborhood took it back,” he said.

Today the housing crisis is the biggest challenge at hand in south Hayward, he added.

“In '94, we did a neighborhood survey, and the issues of highest priority were safety, food and jobs. Housing was not on the list yet,” he recalled. “But since 1997, people need our services because evictions and raises in rent they cannot afford.”

Hector Mendez, director of La Familia Counseling Services, also spoke, drawing cheers and “Amen's” from his audience.

“It's not an easy life working. Sometimes we get too comfortable with a salary and benefits, but we need to go the next level and realize our collective responsibility,” he said.

He turned to Denis Milligan, a WEAP member sitting in a wheelchair next to him.

"You and I fell on this earth in the same time and space," he said. "We need to get to know each other. We always need to continue dialogue with each other," he said.