# Employees at HIV Nonprofit Housing Works Vote to Unionize

The decision arrives after more than a year of organizing at the New York City group that fights HIV and homelessness.

January 12, 2021 By Trent Straube

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Georgians weren't the only ones voting this holiday season. Staff at the HIV nonprofit Housing Works voted overwhelmingly—88% versus 12%—to unionize. Later this year, the 605 workers in the bargaining unit will join the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), reports Patch.com.

Housing Works fights the dual epidemics of HIV and homelessness. Based in Brooklyn, the community nonprofit operates 35 locations across New York City, including thrift stores and bookshops. Last spring, it opened COVID-19 homeless shelters in some of the city's hotels.

> WE DID IT! After 2 years of deep organizing and many road blocks along the way we finally had our union vote and voted 88% to unionize Housing Works! Stay tuned for next steps on moving toward bargaining our contract and happy holidays to all! #union #1U #UnionStrong pic.twitter.com/tQZizDW4hx
>
> — Housing Works Union (@hworksunion) December 23, 2020

Workers had complained about long hours and low pay, according to Patch, calling out the $16-

per-hour wages for 16-hour days and six-day weeks. The hours, workers said, led to burnout and high turnover. The effort to unionize had been underway for at least two years. In November 2019, more than 100 Housing Works staff members walked off the job to protest work conditions and anti-union efforts.

“These workers experienced a needlessly long fight to unionize their workplace,” RWDSU president Stuart Appelbaum said in a release. “Their tenacity and fortitude never wavered in this unnecessarily long process, which was stalled by their employer at every turn. Together, they are ready to win a strong contract that will only enhance their ability to care for the Housing Works community.”

ACT UP New York (@actupny), along with other local groups and leaders, posted congratulations on Twitter, writing: “A HUGE congrats to our comrades at @hworksunion. We know the labor that was put in to make this a reality. For a now 30-year-old organization committed to fighting for HIV/AIDS and housing justice to recognize a union is historic. We salute you. #UnionStrong”

Housing works launched in 1990 as an offshoot of the AIDS activist group ACT UP. Visit HousingWorks.org for more details about the organization and its programs. To learn more about the HIV nonprofit’s fascinating backstory and advocacy efforts, check out “Making HIV History and Housing [SLIDESHOW].” And for a June 2020 profile on Housing Works CEO Charles King, see “Invaluable Treasure.”

In related New York HIV news, severe budget cuts in the state’s crucial HIV programs—including the 340B drug pricing program—are expected to take effect April 1. King and other advocates urged the governor not to abandon efforts to combat HIV, hepatitis and opioid overdoses.

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