

Partnership between the Labor Movement and Black Workers: The Opportunities, Challenges, and Next Steps

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“The two most dynamic and cohesive liberal forces in the country are the labor movement and the Negro freedom movement. Together we can be architects of democracy.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

AFL-CIO National Convention, Miami Beach, Florida, December 11, 1961

“Black lives matter. Brown lives matter. All lives matter. We need safety and justice in Ferguson and communities of color like it all across America.”

—Valerie Long, SEIU Executive Vice President, Washington, DC, November 24, 2014

The Opportunities

Separated by more than half a century, these two statements from two different African American voices express the hopes and expectations that African Americans have had for an alliance between organized labor and the black community. Neither of these African American leaders appealed to altruism, guilt, or charity as the motivation for forging this partnership. Instead, they put forth solidarity, the bedrock premise of labor unions, as the primary reason for linking up in true coalition against much larger enemies.

And, indeed, these sentiments go back much further in history. Since coming to these shores, black people

have striven for economic justice, equal treatment, and opportunity—primarily using collective action as their vehicle. Today, one of the many signs of this continued inclination toward collective action is evident in a 2013 Pew Research Center for the People poll that shows 69 percent of African Americans hold positive views toward unions, compared to just 51 percent for the population as a whole.¹

The plight of African American workers in today’s changing economy should be of great concern to all liberal and progressive institutions. Workers of color have been particularly hard hit by the rising tide of inequality. Among the most important things that black workers need

to survive and grow in today's economy are targeted racial and economic justice programs and projects designed to foster, expand, and support opportunities for black worker organizing and collective action.

While many, if not most, progressives express a commitment to addressing structural inequality, our ability to strategically respond to these concerns is inadequate. And, often, our solutions to these ills fall short because remedies are sought without full consultation with the aggrieved workers—many of whom are low-income workers and women. Emphasis needs to be placed on novel and innovative forms of worker rights organizing within the African American community.

The potential for black workers to help rejuvenate the labor movement and transform it into the ultimate working class and civil rights vehicle is enormous. Just as in the 1960s, today a new, bold generation of young black leaders, many of them women, is emerging. And, even in these extremely difficult times for organizing, we can see some encouraging signs of their success.

While not in the context of labor organizing, the explosion of protests and activism coming out of Ferguson and cities like it can also be seen as amazingly encouraging. It is remarkable that with so few resources, largely young, low-income African Americans have succeeded in sparking a national conversation about racial justice and the historic economic disparities that stem back to the very founding of this nation.

Despite all these reasons for hopefulness, the labor movement has a long way to go to fully realize the untapped potential of black workers. If developed correctly, such a partnership has the power to not only grow and rejuvenate the labor movement but also to push the country to become a more just, equitable, and democratic nation.

The Challenges

Dr. King's words in 1961 did not directly lead the AFL-CIO to shift significant resources toward organizing more black workers (though some unions did) or officially supporting the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 (though some individual unions did that, too). And in the decades that followed, much of the

work done in the name of racial justice did not go far beyond sloganeering and ceremonial events. While some progress has been made in transforming what historically has been a white, male-dominated institution, today's labor movement faces tremendous new challenges in building a strong partnership with the black community.

The Declining State of Black Workers and the Labor Movement

The statistics on African American wealth and wage inequality, unemployment, incarceration, police brutality, and poverty are staggering. To cite just one, as of March 2015, the black unemployment rate (10.1 percent) was more than double that of white unemployment (4.7 percent).² And when considered alongside a contributing factor to many of these growing trends—the decline of the American labor movement—our nation is now facing an exponential growth of structural inequality that not only threatens African Americans, but equality and democracy in the U.S. more broadly.

The labor movement has been hemorrhaging for quite some time now. In 2014 only 11.1 percent of U.S. workers were in unions.³ In terms of private sector unionism, that figure is an anemic 6.6 percent.⁴ Black workers have been particularly harmed by the decline of organized labor, which has been critical to the creation of family-supporting jobs—especially in manufacturing and the public sector. The Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) for example documented that 15.7 percent of all black workers were union members or covered by a union contract at their workplace in 2008. Twenty-five years prior, that share was 31.7 percent.⁵ Despite all this turmoil, black workers are still more likely to be union members today than white, Asian, or Hispanic workers, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.⁶

A recent *Huffington Post* article by Lola Smallwood Cuevas, founder and acting director of the Los Angeles Black Worker Center, eloquently frames the current situation and the need for new thinking and action. “The cause of the Black job crisis is not just the economy. It's the lack of power. No matter how ‘strong’ the economy, we are disproportionately unemployed and in low-wage jobs...Across the nation, 38 percent of Black workers receive low-wages. It is a lack of power that allows these outcomes to occur, and these outcomes destabilize our families and the subsequent poverty is at the root

of mass incarceration, homelessness, health disparities and the educational divide. Solving the Black jobs crisis means realizing Black people are not responsible for the racism that our people have had to endure for more than 100 years.... Solving the Black jobs crisis means building power by organizing Black workers—employed and unemployed—to challenge organized money and power.”⁷

Gender also plays a major role in this conversation, and this too is often ignored. Women in America are more likely to be poor than men. Over a quarter of black women and nearly a quarter of Latina women are poor, and both groups are at least twice as likely as white women to be living in poverty. The recent assault on the public sector in states like Wisconsin, Ohio, New Jersey, and others only adds to this crisis as it both attacks the recipients of government services and the public sector workforce where black women have the highest percentage of employment compared to other races/ethnic groups.⁸

Black women gravitate toward unions. The *National Survey of Black Women in Labor* conducted by the Institute for Policy Studies found that 95 percent of black women surveyed said they would recommend union membership to a friend or family member. This built on a groundbreaking 2007 article “Race, Gender, and the Rebirth of Trade Unionism,” by Professors Kate Bronfenbrenner and Dorian Warren. Their research, based on National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) data on union elections, revealed that women of color have the highest election win rates among all demographic groups. They found that “units with a majority white men have the lowest win rates (35 percent) compared to units that are majority women of color (82 percent).”⁹ And victory margins are even greater when the lead organizer is a woman of color in units with over 75 percent women of color—an astounding 89 percent.¹⁰

Simply put, building the power of the labor movement means building the power of blacks, women, and other people of color. Intersections increase power. They do not divide it.

The Particular Challenges (and Opportunities) of the South

Over fifty percent of the African American population currently lives in the South,¹¹ where unions are next to non-existent and poverty levels are amongst the highest

in the nation. African American poverty rates in states like South Carolina and Tennessee are nearly double those for whites. Past studies by the Economic Policy Institute revealed that unemployment rates for blacks in the South significantly exceeded the overall state rate in 2012 and 2013. For instance, North Carolina had amongst the highest official unemployment rates for blacks in the nation (17.3 percent) in 2012.¹²

Historically unions have not invested significant, concentrated, or sustainable efforts and resources to organizing workers in the South. This inactivity has emboldened already existing conservative and reactionary forces to push the envelope even further when it comes to the mistreatment of workers. Economic growth in the South has on paper looked quite impressive, outpacing the rest of the country for a generation. But much of this growth has been fueled by regressive and overt business-friendly public policies—lower taxes, less stringent regulations, low wages, and restrictive right-to-work laws.

In the face of these extreme challenges, the current ongoing work of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Canton, Mississippi at the Nissan automotive plant helps provide a blueprint as to the art of the possible in worker rights in the South. A nearly 80 percent African American workforce at Nissan’s plant has been consistently intimidated in their quest to form a union.¹³ These workers fully understand that this is a violation of both their worker and civil rights. Religious, civil rights, and student organizations have rallied around this campaign as it represents the embodiment of the March on Washington’s goals of fifty years ago—jobs and freedom. Bob King, former president of the UAW, has called the community support of the Nissan workers in Mississippi “the greatest community and labor partnership he has ever seen in his lifetime of organizing.”¹⁴

Mississippi NAACP President Derrick Johnson, as good a friend as the labor movement has ever had in the state of Mississippi and in the civil rights movement, stated of Nissan that their “actions here in Mississippi represent a clear and visible example of the abuse of power by a global corporation. The people of Mississippi welcomed Nissan with generous incentives and open arms, and our workers have dedicated themselves to making this company successful. While still supporting Nissan,

a number of workers began to have concerns about certain aspects of their employment situation.... Because of these issues, workers reached out to the United Auto Workers union (UAW) and asked for assistance in gaining union representation at the plant. For a company like Nissan, working with a unionized workforce would not seem to be very problematical.... [But] Nissan has reacted to employee interest in unionizing with ‘a sustained campaign of psychological pressure against workers’ organizing efforts.’”¹⁵

The Moral Monday movement offers the labor movement yet another chance to authentically partner with civil rights allies and the black community for larger economic and social gains for all. On paper North Carolina has the lowest state unionization rate in the nation—a paltry 1.9 percent.¹⁶ But in some ways this dearth of unions makes the state incredibly fertile ground for a grassroots revolution. The ever-growing force and tidal wave of the North Carolina Moral Monday movement is changing the very landscape of progressive politics in the state itself and the South more generally. The Moral Monday movement has spotlighted the value of grassroots organizing in the South. How can labor become a greater part of this wave that explicitly looks at race, inequality, politics, and economics? What new organizing opportunities exist to be harnessed in this populist and progressive wave? As Reverend William Barber, president of the North Carolina NAACP, stated a few years ago regarding the historic drive for unionization by the Smithfield meatpacking workers (nearly 40 percent of whom are African American), “There has always been an intrinsic and inextricable connection between the civil rights movement and the labor movement. We in the NC NAACP are proud to have, over the last few years, stood, marched, prayed, and worked with working people in their fight for a union at the Smithfield Plant in Tarheel, North Carolina. These every day hard-working human beings have tonight culminated years of struggle for simple justice with a victorious vote to unionize the plant. This is a mighty move of justice and fairness for everyday workers in North Carolina.”¹⁷

The North Carolina AFL-CIO and other grassroots activists have tried hard to get the national labor movement to fully embrace and sustain this movement and to come to the state and organize. James Andrews,

president of the North Carolina AFL-CIO, stated clearly what working and organizing in his state means. “I joined the struggle for workers’ rights years ago during the civil rights movement. I learned early on that both movements are one and the same. Indeed, our opponents have always been cut from the same cloth.”¹⁸ More unions need to take up this mantle and invest in struggle with black workers to achieve success.

This is what Dr. King spoke about so many years ago when he said “A missing ingredient in the civil rights struggle as a whole has been the power of the labor movement.... The labor movement, if it is to remain vital, needs to raise the standard of living of all workers, not merely those under contracts. As the relative number of workers in unions drop, the strength of labor will fall if it does not become a social force pressing for greater dimensions of wealth for all who labor.”¹⁹

The Need to Move beyond “Color Blindness” to Win and Grow

For the labor movement to reverse its decline and break through the barriers in the South, it needs to address race directly in its strategies and facilitate a frank dialogue about race with rank-and-file members as well as with leadership. This is the first step to prepare for new growth. In speaking extensively to labor activists (the majority of them African American), it is clear there is a strong feeling that the movement’s most valuable existing assets (people of color who are members and staffers) are not getting sufficient opportunities to truly and honestly be seen and represent the face of a new labor movement to America. Many people of color who are currently in the labor movement are frustrated by the traditional internal barriers placed upon them and their work, and the opportunities they see the unions lose each day based upon outdated thinking.

One of the most dated notions is that being a “color blind” organization is the best way to support people of color and tamp down any frustrations that could arise from white staffers or members. Color blindness is a racial ideology that posits the best way to end discrimination is by treating individuals as equally as possible, without regard to race, culture, or ethnicity. Color blindness is too pervasive in the U.S. labor movement rhetoric and ranks. Taking the approach of “do no harm” seems fair on the surface, but so much

recent research goes to prove that this approach in fact results in the opposite of its intent.

White racial justice activist Tim Wise puts it aggressively but succinctly when he states “by ‘liberal color blindness,’ I am referring to a belief that although racial disparities are certainly real and troubling—and although they are indeed the result of discrimination and unequal opportunity—paying less attention to color or race is a progressive and open-minded way to combat those disparities.... But in fact, color blindness is exactly the opposite of what is needed to ensure justice and equity for persons of color. To be blind to color, as Julian Bond has noted, is to be blind to the consequences of color, ‘and especially the consequences of being the wrong color in America.’”²⁰

What is needed instead today is an organization and labor movement where race matters and diversity, equity, and inclusion truly prevail in all its public and private thinking and action. By 2040 people of color will be the majority in the United States. Today they hover at nearly 40 percent of the population.²¹ Taking the time to create a labor movement and individual unions that can actually respect and embrace this change is fundamental. There is little choice in the matter. As William H. Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution, recently noted “More so than ever, we need to recognize the importance of young minorities for the growth and vitality of our labor force and economy.”²² The CEPR report, “The Changing Face of Labor, 1983-2008,” reinforces this new reality as it analyzed trends in the union workforce over the last quarter century and found it more diverse today than just twenty-five years ago. Author John Schmitt noted, “The view that the typical union worker is a white male manufacturing worker may have been correct a quarter of a century ago, but it’s not an accurate description of those in today’s labor movement.”²³

Race and racial issues are often uncomfortable to discuss and riddled with tensions and stress within many organizations. Why would we expect the labor movement to be better at tackling these issues openly than say the LGBTQI or the environmental movement? In fact, many progressive organizations, as social-change organization consultants Heather Berthoud and Bob Greene note, may be externally clear in their anti-racist/pro-diversity views but internally silent on their own racial

challenges and bias. They tell us this paradox must be confronted. “Social change activists, committed to justice with sophisticated policy analyses and good intentions, often resist looking at inequities within the organizations they run, or how their own behavior helps maintain those inequalities.”²⁴ Much can be done to help organizations that want to change. Organizations are not static, but identifying these issues is the first step.

Positive Steps toward Building a Genuine Partnership between the Labor Movement and the Black Community

There are a growing number of efforts happening nationally to make a real partnership between black workers and the labor movement. Many of the leaders of these efforts are unsung and the projects fledgling. The majority could use additional support and many campaigns involving low-wage workers have to be acknowledged for what they truly are—black worker campaigns. Campaigns need to reflect race and not overlook the obvious. As an important *Al Jazeera America* article from 2013 entitled “Black Workers Embody the New Low-Wage Economy”²⁵ stated “In places like St. Louis, Detroit, New York and Durham, N.C., African-Americans have come to symbolize low-wage labor, a role typically filled by immigrants.” This is a fact. To state it as such clarifies a reality that some seem to want to obfuscate.

A movement is building as the new *#BlackWorkersMatter* report clearly spells this out. In this final section, an attempt will be made to highlight a few efforts that hope to amplify the voices on the ground and show the art of the possible.

Over the past two years, a series of strategic meetings and initiatives have served as a steady and growing drum beat to lift up the importance of organizing black workers and connect it to the mainstream labor movement. In October 2013 Georgetown University hosted the first ever State of the Black Worker in America conference. Speakers from across the country delved into the history of black workers and their organizing efforts, the current state and vision of black leadership within unions, innovative and cutting edge black-led organizing going

on across the country, and a gender-based analysis of black organizing. The day before the conference, the Discount Foundation and the Neighborhood Funders Group brought together a range of field partners with the foundation staff, and discussed current organizing efforts and the implications and landscape of philanthropic partnerships in support of this work. The theory behind both events was clear. The word black was not shied away from, as both white union leadership and staff need not be afraid to attend and participate in meetings where race is the topic and funders need not be afraid to fund organizations that use race as an organizing tool in their work. A second State of Black Workers conference is planned for May 2015 at Columbia University.

In April 2014 Georgetown built on this previous event with a two-day meeting, Keys to Revitalization: Organizing Black Workers and Communities in the South. The conference drew over fifty invited thought leaders, labor leaders, civil rights, faith, and Southern leaders to talk extensively about how unions could come into the South more strategically and connect with more black workers. Key to this strategic conversation were four Southern chapter presidents of the NAACP—North Carolina, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Each one of these states represents a new electoral, political, and demographic shift that must be capitalized upon. These leaders know that civil rights and labor rights are interlinked and will live and die together in the Deep South.

In addition, leadership and staff from a number of major national AFL-CIO and Change to Win unions such as the United Auto Workers (UAW), United Steelworkers (USW), Service Employees International Union (SEIU), United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), Communications Workers of America (CWA), and American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) have participated in ongoing and organized conversations with the project around black worker organizing in the South and a broader civil rights agenda. These trade unions, all at different stages of their relationship in working with black workers and the community, yearn to develop a more transformational relationship with communities in the South and not simply a transactional one that has traditionally led only to short-term gains.

In 2015 additional Keys to Revitalization meetings will be held, now with the Institute for Policy Studies as the lead, to continue to deepen this organizing conversation in the Deep South and to help develop campaigns focused on both traditional and new organizing opportunities in the South with black workers as the focus. The hope for these conversations is that they will present allies in labor with factual information and analysis as to why an emphasis on black worker organizing is a critical step in changing the politics of the South and helping to revitalize the labor movement. Additional goals are to show the importance of unions having a stronger racial justice analysis in all its work and finally to build authentic relationships between black communities in the South and national labor leaders.

In February 2015 the leadership of the AFL-CIO voted to create a new Labor Commission on Racial and Economic Justice to examine how issues of race can be better addressed by the organization going forward. In making this decision, they cited “an ugly history of racism in our own movement.”²⁶ The new Commission aims to develop programs to improve communication and cooperation between AFL-CIO unions and African American communities. AFL-CIO President Trumka lauded the creation of the commission, stating “The labor movement has an opportunity to be on the right side of history by standing up for racial and economic justice at a time when these issues are at the front of the public consciousness. When we have embraced our better selves, we have always emerged stronger in every sense.”²⁷ There is optimism in the ranks that this new commission will listen closely to all of its membership, promote diversity and inclusion, learn to avoid “dog whistle politics,” and embrace fully in a positive way the amazing amount of energy that is reflected in the streets of Ferguson and other cities asking for racial and economic justice.

Conclusion

Opportunities for authentic partnership between black workers and the labor movement abound. Labor needs to prepare itself to fully embrace it. The initiatives described above will hopefully continue and expand, leading to greater consensus around concrete steps that should be taken to build a genuine partnership between labor and black communities.

Alicia Garza, a brilliant black organizer for the National Domestic Workers Alliance, an emerging leader, and a co-founder of #BlackLivesMatter, expresses the reality that so many black workers today face when trying to find an authentic place and home within unions.

Garza states, “I consider myself to be a part of the labor movement, but I guess the question is ‘Does the labor movement consider me to be part of it?’”²⁸

Labor has to come up with the correct answer.

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