

#BlackLivesMatter and #Fightfor15

February 12, 2016



It may be that in 20 or 30 years we will look back to 2015 as the year that things really began to change in the U.S. This was the year we saw the intersection of the movement for higher wages and Black Lives Matter really begin to crystalize.

Let's go back to 2011. On September 17, activists began occupying Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan, calling attention to the growing inequality between the 99% and 1%, and the massive disconnect between social and economic justice on the one hand, and our political system on the other. The action got little press attention, and even many on the left assumed the rag-tag protest would soon dissipate.

Meanwhile, civil rights activists had their eyes focused on the upcoming execution of Troy Davis. Davis had been convicted of killing a police officer in Georgia in 1989 and sentenced to death. But the evidence against Davis was questionable, and over the next 20 years advocates worked to get the conviction overturned. Despite these attempts, and a large public campaign calling for clemency, the appeals were rejected and the execution was set to take place on September 21, 2011. The night of the execution, protestors took to the streets in many parts of the country — including in Zuccotti Park — to mourn his death and express their outrage at an unjust criminal justice system.

The next night, more protestors convened in Union Square, then marched to Zuccotti Park and joined the Occupy protestors. The New York police (NYPD) quickly converged on the park and began arresting people, sometimes with force. According to one report written that night:

The reaction of the NYPD Thursday night was predictably overzealous and needlessly violent. What wasn't expected, however, was the spontaneous merger of two growing struggles. One group has taken to the streets out of frustration with an economic status-quo they say leaves too many with not enough. The other has voiced outrage over a so-called justice system that disproportionately targets, imprisons and kills people of color.

Both are struggles against marginalization. Both are refusing to remain silent.

They have now marched together, stood up to the police together and been arrested together. Such experiences can create formidable bonds. In its attempt to suppress popular dissent, the NYPD may have just emboldened a movement.[1]

From then, there continued to be an alliance between the movement against inequality and the movement against police brutality, particularly the ways in which the criminal justice system targeted black people. This alliance was fostered in part by Occupy Wall Street itself, which had working groups [2] focused on criminal justice and racial justice issues, [3] as well as groups

ranging from Anonymous, Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, Picture the Homeless, left/socialist organizations and the Center for Constitutional Rights.

The alliance was not perfect, nor always easy. Some people raised objections about the way Occupy functioned, as its consensus model seemed to privilege white male leaders, and could easily marginalize people of color and issues that they prioritized. Some Occupy activists argued that focusing on racism could be divisive in the new movement. But a core of activists continued to work together, integrating people of color leadership and connecting the issues of social and economic justice. Black activists participated in Occupy events; Occupy activists joined protests related to Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, as well as the controversial “stop and frisk” NYPD program. For example, on Father’s Day 2012, Occupy activists joined thousands of other protestors in the anti-Stop and Frisk March. This alliance continued via networks and loose organizations long after Occupy was evicted from the park. In many cases these were loose organizations or simply social media circles or Facebook pages — such as the Trayvon Martin Organizing Committee NYC — many of which built on relationships formed during Occupy. In 2014, some of the labor unions that had supported and participated in Occupy Wall Street helped organize a march in memory of Eric Garner on Staten Island.

In November 2012, one year after the Occupy eviction from Zuccotti, fast food workers went on strike in New York City. The strike was organized in large part by community organizations New York Communities for Change, the worker center Make the Road, and the union SEIU — three groups that had worked with and were inspired by Occupy Wall Street. Many of the strikers, and their supporters, were black. The strikers called for \$15 per hour minimum wage and a union to represent them at work. The next day of strikes was held on April 4, 2013, the anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Leaders such as Charlene Carruthers, of the Black Youth Project 100, talked about the budding alliance: “Black and brown workers are at the forefront of the FF15. We wanted to make sure their narrative was representative. We tried to shift the messaging and make sure that the FF15 was more squarely centered in racial and gender justice.”[4]

Over the following years, the fast food strikes spread across the country (and eventually, internationally). These coordinated actions morphed into a demand for \$15 for all workers, or “Fight for \$15.” The strikes continued, but activists also launched campaigns to set citywide minimum wages of \$15 per hour. Coalitions grew, pushing for higher wages and worker rights.

Alongside this, the movement for police accountability and criminal justice reform grew into Black Lives Matter after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the Trayvon Martin case. Starting simply as a hashtag, Black Lives Matter is now a movement and network with international reach.

As Fight for \$15 and Black Lives Matter each grew, the two continued to overlap and intersect, sometimes providing solidarity for one another, and sometimes deliberately coordinating actions together. For example, on Martin Luther King’s birthday in 2015, many activists attended rallies to protest for higher wages and better working conditions at retail stores in New York City then joined a march from Harlem to the UN calling for an end to police brutality. In a 2015 day of action for \$15, Eric Garner’s mother, Gwen Carr, spoke at a rally noting the links between the issues. Workers rights groups and racial justice groups have been increasingly using “Black Friday,” the day after Thanksgiving, as a common day of protest.

Alicia Garza, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, is also on staff with the National Domestic Workers Alliance, highlighting the ways in which activists are linking economic and racial justice (including with immigrant rights issues).

In many ways, the alliance is an obvious one. Black workers comprise a disproportionate share of

low-wage workers; they also have higher unionization rates than non-Black workers. The movements for economic justice and racial justice have intersected throughout history — from the movement to abolish slavery to the collaboration between civil rights groups and public sector unions in the 1960s. Yet that does not mean the alliance is a natural or easy one. Labor unions have an unflattering history of racial exclusion, and while an increasing share of union members are black, the leadership is still overwhelmingly white. And many civil rights organizations, including churches have tried to avoid confrontational class-based politics for fear it could be divisive within the black community, or due to relations with the Democratic Party and elected officials.

Furthermore, the Black Lives Matter movement is a loose network with no clear hierarchy or structure. Fight for 15 is in some ways also a loose network of campaigns and activists, but behind it are labor unions and organizations that are highly structured and hierarchical. Black Lives Matter is operating through social protest and direct action without clear demands or a policy agenda. Fight for 15 is using protests and direct action but also has a clear policy agenda, aiming to win a clear demand and pressure politicians or use the ballot initiative process to pass higher wages. Black Lives Matter has been militant and insistent on challenging the police and elected officials (and even left-leaning political candidates like Bernie Sanders); Fight for 15 works closely with labor unions that have historically stood by the police union and many elected officials.[5]

Despite these differences, the movements have been working together in various ways. In New York City, the campaigns have a t-shirt that says “Black Lives Matter,” “Fight for \$15,” “Freedom Fighters,” and “Hand’s Up, Don’t Shoot,” and “I Can’t Breathe.” Activists wear these shirts at rallies and protests, and when testifying for a higher wage in front of the New York State Wage Board. In Chicago, Fight for 15 is working with Black Youth Project 100. According to sources, bringing BLM into the Fight for 15 has helped move the latter to the left, pushing the labor movement to take racial justice as central. Alicia Garza noted, “In Ferguson I saw leaders from the Fight for \$15 movement really on the front lines moving labor leaders by saying, ‘I’m not just a worker. I’m somebody who lives in this community, who is being targeted by the police all the time — and you have to see that about me.’” [6] Douglas Hall, a member of the Fight for \$15 National Organizing Committee, says, “What good is \$15 an hour and a union if my daughter is murdered. That money would have been nothing. There’s a direct relation between these issues.”[7]

On the other hand, the alliance pushes BLM to integrate economic issues into their vision. In California, the Black Lives Matter Bay Area issued a statement declaring their partnership with the Fight for \$15, noting the need to bring in economic justice issues: “The movement for Black lives is about more than criminalization and incarceration. Because the lives of Black people are not one dimensional, the fight for justice must also be multi-layered in its approach. As Black people, we are fighting for our basic humanity; the ability to watch our children grow up, to live in communities free of fear, and to have the resources that we need to survive.”[8]

This budding alliance is exciting for several reasons. Each of these movements on their own would be important: movements that have grown quickly around bold demands, capturing the public’s attention and for now, it seems, their support (polls show a majority of whites do not support Black Lives Matter, but polls also show a large increase in all Americans that think African Americans do not receive fair treatment). But the intersection of the movements takes this to a new level, by integrating issues that are clearly connected (race and class, economic and racial justice), as well as making short-term immediate demands alongside deeper systemic critiques. The ways in which it is an uneasy alliance seem productive, as they have pushed both sides to be more comprehensive and deal with challenging issues. Rather than avoiding complicated and divisive issues, the intersection of the movements takes them on. It seems impossible to imagine building a more just society without both elements of this alliance.

[1] Ryan Devereaux, "Troy Davis Protestors Occupy Wall Street," New America Media. September 24, 2011.

[2] Such as Occupy Faith, the Occupy Wall Street Meditation Working Group, Occupy Criminal Justice Working Group, and the Occupy Wall Street Activist Legal Working Group.

[3] Occupy Wall Street had issued a communiqué on their fifth day of protesting, decrying the Davis execution. "A Message from Occupied Wall Street (Day Five)"

[4] Brendan McQuade , "A United Front." Jacobin. September 2, 2015.

[5] Last year the United Auto Workers Local 2865, made up of teaching assistants and other campus workers at the University of California, called on the AFL-CIO to expel the police union from the AFL-CIO.

[6] Amy B. Dean, "Is the Fight for \$15 the Next Civil Rights Movement?" *AlJazeera America*, June 22, 2015.

[7] David Moberg, "In Latest Round of Fast Food Strikes, Fight for \$15 Tells Politicians: "Come Get My Vote." *Working In These Times*. November 11, 2015.

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