

# Firing Up the House of Labor to Fight for Racial Justice: Confronting Hard Truths

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Criticizing labor is hard for socialists. On the one hand we know the unions are the underdog in the class struggle, and it's painfully apparent that our society has suffered because unions are so weak. At the same time, it's clear most unions can't or won't live up to their social and political obligations.

Nowhere is this hard truth more apparent than in Rich Trumka's statement for the AFL-CIO about the George Floyd protests in Washington. Trumka starts on a strong note, asserting racism plays "an insidious role in the daily lives of all working people of color." He commits labor to "fight for reforms in policing and to address issues of racial and economic inequality." But there are no specifics about what labor should do differently to make these unassailable ideals a reality. Trumka's statement is silent about what labor will demand of the candidate it endorses for President in terms of defunding police, creating jobs, and providing health care and affordable housing for those most impacted by the pandemic's intensification of inequality, low-income blacks and hispanics. He ignores calls to boot the police unions out of the house of labor because they are used to repress the challenges to social, economic, and political inequality such as we see now in our streets, the kind of struggle that has historically won significant gains for working people.

Instead, Trumka's anger is aimed at "fringes who are engaging in violence and destroying property," such as the AFL-CIO headquarters. These actions, he proclaims, are "senseless, disgraceful and only play into the hands of those who have oppressed workers of color for generations and detract from the peaceful, passionate protesters who are rightly bringing issues of racism to the forefront." Equally problematic in the statement is absence of reflection about the continuing reality of racism within unions and among union members. Though Trumka notes racism is a "workplace" and "community issue" because unions "are the community" his statement shows labor's refusal to own up to its historic complicity, going back to the 1930s, in the federal government's discriminatory labor-market policy, as summarized by Richard Rothstein: "... at the behest of Southern congressmen, New Deal labor standards, like minimum wages and the right to unionize, excluded from coverage, for undisguised racial purposes, occupations in which black workers predominated. The federal government granted exclusive collective bargaining rights to segregated private-sector

unions, including some that entirely excluded African-Americans from their trades, into the 1970s. Government thus depressed income levels of African-American workers below levels of comparable white workers, contributing to black families' inability to accumulate the wealth needed to move to equity-appreciating white suburbs."

In contrast to the way Trumka analyzes labor's relationship to racial justice struggles, Julius Jacobson, one of *New Politics'* founding editors, writing in 1968 described the hard truth about working class racism and labor's failure to combat it effectively:

*"The racist attitudes of American Workers are a social problem with roots that are deep and complex. The unions are certainly not responsible for this state of affairs. The AFL-CIO does not preach discrimination. On the contrary, its formal educational material invariably advances the ideas of racial equality and nothing said here is intended to detract from what the labor movement has contributed to civil rights legislation. The point is that the good that the union movement does is primarily on an elitist level, i.e. it is done from above. There has been no corresponding effort to bring the principles of racial equality home to the rank and file. For this reason, the union movement, bureaucratized and elitist, must assume its share of responsibility for the racial savagery and ignorance exhibited by so many rank-and-file workers."* (Introduction to his edited collection, *The Negro and the American Labor Movement*, Anchor Books)

Having union executive boards pass motions supporting BLM or the protests, which even transnational corporations have now done, is a milestone. However unions, unlike corporations, are supposed to have policy set by members. Few unions have tackled the difficult work of educating members about why their interests cannot be separated from the success of this movement, and yet without at least passive support from members, statements or monetary support for "social justice" causes can backfire. As David Roediger argues, failing to address the inseparability of race and class has resulted in a retreat from both. Yet in the past several years activists in unions, including reform caucuses in teachers unions, have begun the difficult, intensive work of fusing racial justice work with defense of union members' economic needs. Central to this work is creating democratic spaces to navigate the tensions. As one ethnographic study concluded "social justice caucuses fight racism through practices that democratize their unions, and at the same time, the focus on racial justice drives the need for greater union democracy."

Very often appeals to unions to fight for social justice ignore this reciprocal relationship between fighting for racial justice and democratizing a union. In the process, analysis ignores the intensity of racism in the working class and divorces it from the functioning of the labor apparatus, as Jacobson describes. While the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) has indeed "given a glimpse of the best of American labor — one at the forefront of fighting all forms of oppression" with its support for bus drivers who refused to transport protestors to prison, a bitter struggle to democratize the union laid the basis for its leadership to defend black members taking action in defense of the protests. The Association for Union Democracy (AUD) newsletter summarizes that history in its obituary for Larry Hanley, the ATU's longtime president, who in 1979 became a bus driver and member of ATU Local 726 in Staten Island, New York's most racially segregated and politically conservative borough.

The obituary recounts how "Hanley was on the receiving end of threats and even beatings from the union higher-ups for daring to speak out at membership meetings or seeking to run for office...Assaulted and brought up on internal charges for speaking out, he sought help from AUD" and with help from Herman Benson (AUD's founder), Hanley successfully fought off slander charges. By December, 1984, Hanley was elected secretary- treasurer of the local "because he established a reputation as a fighter for the local's members." Hanley's fight against corruption in the national union eventually led to his election as ATU president. Hanley's start as a union activist in his Staten Island local began with a campaign to stop passenger assaults on bus drivers, asking "How many

more funerals do we have to have before we put a stop to assaults on bus drivers?" He used the campaign for driver safety to engage rank-and-file workers to make demands on their union, to drive the union's direction. Unlike Trumka who lashes out at the vandalism and looting, not the ruling class, Hanley put the onus on the boss for solutions. The problem of bus driver safety persists and in 2016 Hanley directed attention to investing in new buses, which haven't been "redesigned in probably 60 years," rather than casting the issue in law-and-order terms.

As Larry Hanley's work demonstrates, struggles for union democracy count when we're figuring out why some unions are leaders in fighting for racial justice. Yet, not all battles for union democracy have received the same attention. Consider this report on a union convention by dissidents contesting the politics and policies of their union's officials: In a local of 7,000 members only 400 vote for delegates to their national convention; international representatives appointed by the officers and general executive board "entered the locals just prior to elections and had themselves elected as delegates" and used "filibustering methods" that make meetings drag on and on, sending "most of the members home" until the supporters of the leadership "have a majority to elect their delegates."

Activists trying to reform their unions today are familiar with all of these practices, but this report isn't about trying to oust union bureaucrats today. It describes the 1942 convention of UERMW (United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America), a CIO union. The rest of the story describes how its leading officials, members or supporters of the Communist Party (CP), retained control of union policies. The report continues "The UE convention did not represent its 435,000 rank and file members... It was controlled from start to finish by the Stalinist machine, and practically every resolution might have been lifted bodily from the yellow pages of the *Daily Worker*." The rest of the article documents how each resolution corresponded to political positions the CP took.

It's not just the CP's politics per se that were objectionable but also its use of the union apparatus to advance positions members did not necessarily know about or support. Both undercut claims CP-controlled unions are examples we should follow to make labor stand up for racial justice. While there is ample evidence militants in these unions bravely championed social justice, the context of those accomplishments undercuts the singularity of their legacy. Union officers loyal to the CP often used their power to suppress ideas they opposed and destroy livelihoods of reformers they despised, as revolutionary socialist dockworker Stan Weir chronicled in his life-long battle against Harry Bridges and the leadership of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). Weir was also involved in shop-floor struggles against union officials who gave away workers' rights, trading the union's political and economic independence for cozy personal relationships with politicians. Exploring Weir's remarkable personal relationship with James Baldwin takes me beyond this article, but it is worth noting as it invites reflection on how his life-long career as a worker and union activist encouraged social relationships that transcended his membership in white socialist organizations that defended principles of anti-racism but had few black members. Moreover, leaders who controlled the Party and unions treated racial justice struggles as instrumental to the CP's primary goal - supporting Moscow's directives. Hence the party dropped campaigns against racism during World War II, even opposing plans for a march on Washington by A. Philip Randolph, whom the CP labeled "subversive."

I've described elsewhere how transforming teachers unions requires framing teachers' labor struggles so they speak both to racial justice and teachers' self-interest as workers, and this challenge applies to the entire labor movement. The specifics of this process depend on many factors, including the sector; however the key is *redefining* workers' interests, away from what researcher Diane Goodman calls "a short-sighted and short-term perspective on self-interest, concerned with immediate benefits, most often material in nature." Goodman argues for a different

notion, self-interest as mutually beneficial: Work on behalf of others is simultaneously work on behalf of ourselves since our lives and fates are so intertwined.

The work of CORE (Caucus of Rank and File Educators) offers us an inspiring example - not a template - of how we can bring white workers and workers of color together in struggles that fight explicitly and simultaneously for racial justice and for economic gains. After winning leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union, CORE engaged in the kind of political education unions must. "The Schools Chicago Students Demand," its program for change in Chicago schools, embedded contract demands for improvements in working conditions and economic security in a framework that centered racism. Naming Chicago schools an "apartheid" system encouraged the trust from communities of color essential for the CTU to win its strike and battle with Rahm Emmanuel and the powerful capitalist elite that controlled the schools. The CTU did not prioritize "class-wide" demands, as some socialists have suggested we should. It redefined the self-interests of members, bringing them into struggle in a strike that fused both class and race demands.

The understanding that white workers' self-interest cannot be separated from the struggle for racial justice, and that fighting for both economic and racial justice challenge the capitalist status quo, has begun to reverberate in the streets. Goodman's definition of self-interest is really another way of articulating one of labor's defining principles, solidarity. Solidarity, in turn, depends on making the unions democratic, putting workers back in control of the organizations they rely on to speak for them collectively. Defending truths about union democracy and the inseparability of racial and economic justice in our society has shown to be extraordinarily demanding work, yet it is an unavoidable goal if the organized power of the working class is to (help) free the human race. The consequences of not accomplishing it grow more apparent each day, as do the possibilities.

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