

Labor Day 2015: Which sides are you on?



This Labor Day, which sides are you on?

Nope, “sides” is not a typo. This Labor Day I’m calling on organized labor to grapple with and overcome our unions’ simultaneously heroic and sordid history in regard to social justice and especially racial equality, U.S. working people’s “Many Pasts.”

Liberals often don’t want to touch criticism of labor unions because this would be “washing dirty laundry in public,” weakening a frequently-attacked progressive force we badly need. But the corporate media and the Right are quick to expose union wrongdoing – though they are silent about Wall Street’s corruption. We can’t clean up problems we don’t face so we actually weaken unions when we don’t insist on their being self-critical.

One reality we should discuss this Labor Day is that unions can’t be counted on to be on the right side of the struggle between wage earners and the boss. They still have the identity crisis Kim Moody described in 1998. The AFL-CIO has the “vaguely class-oriented idea that the federation must speak for all ‘working families’ and turn up the ‘street heat’

to organize the millions.” But at the same time the unions cling to the illusion they will be rewarded if they cozy up to capitalism, accepting all but its worst excesses.

This schizophrenia is apparent in the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which collaborates with the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Through NED, AFT assists the U.S. State Department to undercut unions that are unfriendly to U.S. capitalism. In doing so the AFT subverts resistance to the global project to destroy public education. NED sponsors the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) which supports “development of market-oriented institutions around the world.” While it has started to campaign against privatization of education, AFT simultaneously pushes for the “free market” globally. Which side is the AFT on?

Let’s commend the positive change in labor, like its shift on immigrant rights, the campaign for #FightFor15, efforts to raise the issue of race in unions in response to #BlackLivesMatter. But these efforts are constrained by the unions’ lack of internal democracy and unwillingness to break with business (unionism) as usual. Unions can’t fix every social problem and ought not be expected to do so, but to win the loyalty and trust of working people labor has to embrace and act on the principle that if it’s a social justice problem, it’s a labor issue.

When AFL-CIO President Rich Trumka acknowledges the contradiction of police unions being in AFSCME, that both Michael Brown’s mother and killer are union members and “our brother killed our sister’s son,” he begins to do that. However, it’s not enough to talk. We need the courage to enforce the principle that solidarity, social justice and democracy are as “union” as salary and wages. Though it may seem counter-intuitive, but when unions make social justice (and union democracy) labor issues they become the connective tissue of a broad social movement that wins public loyalty and trust in labor battles.

What does this kind of unionism actually look like? The Battle of Virden in Illinois, a miners strike, simultaneously inspires and cautions about the challenge unions face in confronting racism. As Carl Weinberg explains, to break the miners' strike, which had deep, social support and an extraordinarily courageous, militant union, employers recruited blacks from Alabama, bringing them by train to Illinois. African-American union miners, mainly from Springfield, helped patrol the tracks approaching Virden in a show of solidarity with their brother miners. In a remarkable show of solidarity, "penniless Black miners and their families who arrived in Virden refused to serve as strikebreakers once they learned the truth of the situation." Yet the operators' "divide and conquer" tactic was partly successful in making white Illinois miners believe that blacks would always be strikebreakers. The strike was successful in winning its immediate aims but Weinberg concludes that the limit of the miners' success in the Battle of Virden was "the powerful and ongoing scourge of racism in the region."

The other part of this story is how black miners who defended union principles negotiated relations with racist miners. The letters of Richard L. Davis, a black spokesman in the 1880s and 1890s for many black miners in Ohio and three southern states, shows he had a tough sell as an intermediary with the white majority and white national leadership of the UMWA. But what a salesman he was! In one letter he responds to a black miner who justified going to coal fields near Seattle, Washington, breaking a strike. Striking white miners and the Seattle labor movement as a whole responded with vicious, violent racism to this strike breaking, yet Davis held fast to his defense of interracial solidarity. In his letter he asserts the need to fight for racial equality in the society, union and the coal fields.

But he then turns the issue around and asks the strikebreaking miner "suppose that you were working in a place and the

company brought in three or four hundred white men to take your places, what would be the result? I fancy you would not speak as you do now. No, sir, you would pick [up] your gun if you had one, and you would try to kill every white man that you saw, whether he was your enemy or not."

Davis responds to the strikebreaker's argument that "28 years ago he was a chattel slave; today he is a free American citizen" by pointing to workers' shared self-interest: "How utterly false! None of us who toil for our daily bread are free...Does any negro think that an operator thinks any more of him than he does of a white man? If you do, you are sadly mistaken, for I remember several instances right here in this valley: whenever the colored men asked for that which was something like right and just, the answer was, whenever you colored men want the same as the whites do then we have no further need for you...it is not a white man's country; it is partly ours as well." Davis urges black strikers to defend their rights to be treated as equals, a right they forfeit when they allow themselves to be used to break strikes.

We hear Davis' ideas in battles that are not typically seen as "labor" struggles but in fact, are, if we take the struggle for racial equality, for social justice, to be a labor principle as dear as not crossing a picket line in a contract dispute. "You are not better than us; you are not smarter than us; and you do not love these children more than we do," says Jitu Brown, one of the African American activists in the #FightForDyett in their third week of a hunger strike demanding their rights as parents, citizens to be involved in deciding what school their children should attend. They are pushing back against "systemic disinvestment" in Chicago public schools by the powerful elite that runs the city under the helm of President Obama's former chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel.

The school district has been dismantling neighborhood schools and with them, African American neighborhoods. Activist

teachers in the Chicago Teachers Union have been supporting the Dyett 12, as they're called, but the hunger strikers deserve and need far more help from other unions, especially the Illinois state teachers unions, the Illinois AFL-CIO, and the two national teachers unions. A letter from both state teachers unions to the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus is not an adequate response to address "white silence" – organized labor's historic complicity in racial segregation in Chicago and Illinois schools. The letter is an embarrassingly token gesture.

I was recently asked by a union activist "How many backs do we have to watch?" My answer: As many as we want to watch ours. That's the meaning of solidarity. Let's live it this Labor Day by taking sides. Dyett hunger strikers and Black Lives Matter are giving U.S. unions an opportunity to reinvigorate themselves.

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