Punched in the Face: Minneapolis Labor and the Fight for #JusticeforGeorgeFloyd

written by Caleb Brennan | June 23, 2020

A protest for George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Source: Wikicommons

On the second day of what would eventually become the Minneapolis uprising in response to the murder of George Floyd, Adam Birch, a bus driver, got a message over his intercom that Metro Transit, the public transportation authority of the Twin Cities, needed volunteers at the 3rd Precinct. When Birch heard the message, he knew exactly what the request meant.

"They potentially wanted people to transport cops and to transport arrested protesters to jail," Birch told me. Back in 2016, before becoming a bus driver, he'd been arrested at a demonstration protesting the death of Philando Castille, a Black man killed by police outside of St. Paul. Birch was taken to jail on a Metro Transit bus. So, after his shift ended, he stuck around the garage to talk his coworkers out of volunteering to help the Minneapolis Police Department. "I said 'hey, do you really want to be put in a dangerous situation for a police department that, you know, kills people?'" he recalled.

Many of Birch's coworkers—members of Local 1005 of the Amalgamated Transit Union—were uncomfortable with the idea and went home for the day. By the time the cops came to ask for assistance, the garage was almost empty. "One driver in particular was called up to the dispatch window. They said 'we need somebody to take cops from here to here.' And she was like, 'No, I'm not gonna do that' and she's sat back down," said Birch.

A day after the 3rd Precinct burned to the ground, Birch created a petition called "Union Members for #JusticeForGeorgeFloyd" and organized a small rally of union members before joining the protest outside the 5th Precinct. "We are willing to talk to our co-workers about why the labor movement needs to take a stand against racist police violence of our brothers, sisters, and siblings," the petition reads. ATU Local 1005 supported Birch's action and also released a statement expressing support for the uprisings and criticizing the MPD's request for drivers to help them move about the city.

Minnesota unions and labor activists from different industries launched similar endeavors. Members of AFSCME Local 2822, which represents Hennepin County Clerical Workers, were out marching in the streets everyday. Minnesota Workers United, a grassroots labor organization that brings together workers from a variety of sectors, organized a protest outside of Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman's home. The Minnesota AFL-CIO demanded that Bob Kroll, President of the Minneapolis Police Union and a known Trump supporter, step down.

“Minneapolis Police Union President, Bob Kroll, has failed the Labor Movement and the residents of Minneapolis,” their statement read. “Bob Kroll has a long history of bigoted remarks and complaints of violence made against him. As union President, he antagonizes and disparages members of the Black community. He advocates for military-style police tactics making communities less safe and the police force more deadly.”

When the University of Minnesota announced it would cut ties with the MPD, Robert Panning-Miller, former president of the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, was reminded that there had been a contentious debate in Minneapolis three years earlier over whether Student Resource Officers should remain in public schools. “I went and looked and I realized that the contract is expiring this August and so I started putting out word that this is something we need to make sure is not renewed,” Panning-Miller told me. “What do the SROs do besides facilitate the school-to-prison pipeline?”

After some quick research and a few Facebook posts, his call to end the relationship between Minneapolis public schools and the MPD became an uproar, amplified by other members of the MFT. On June 2nd, Panning-Miller and the union, along with parents and students, rallied outside the Davis Center in support of the new legislation. That same day, a unanimous vote by the school board terminated the $1.1 million contract.

While much of the labor movement in Minneapolis has embedded itself in the city’s struggle against police brutality, union leadership at the national level has shied away from demands that it clean house. As criticism of the presence of police unions within the AFL-CIO grows, powerful leaders like Richard Trumka have hesitated, offering platitudes over concrete policy. “The short answer is not to disengage and just condemn. The answer is to totally re-engage and educate,” Trumka said during a press call on June 3rd. Likewise, AFSCME president Lee Saunders defended police officers’ right to unionize, while also arguing that collective bargaining shouldn’t “be construed as a shield for misconduct or criminal behavior.”

In fact, shielding members from accountability is what police unions do. The strong collective bargaining agreements formulated by police union organizers have weaponized the philosophy of the union movement to protect officers from being fired for extrajudicially murdering people of color. For example, many police unions inked contracts with cities that prevent government agencies from immediately interviewing officers who brutalize suspects or engage in sexual misconduct with arrestees. These protections, enforced by police unions, play a vital role allowing police officers to enforce the racial stratification that permeates every aspect of American society; a phenomenon that unions have both fought against and been complicit in.

The labor movement has long struggled with its own internal history of racial injustice and segregation. While Black workers make up the largest racial group within America’s rank-and-file and the decline of union membership in general has contributed to the racial wealth gap, the fact remains that modern labor institutions were shaped by racial prejudice; the influential Wagner Act, which granted private sectors right to organize unions, explicitly exempted farm hands and domestic workers—a tactic to keep Black workers from participating in collective bargaining. Throughout the 20th century and into the present, many white workers (even union workers) have viewed workers of color, especially Black workers, as a threat to their wages and privilege.

Robin Kelley, an academic who focuses on the political and cultural aspects of Black history, cites the growing inclusion of Black workers into unions during the 50s and 60s as a key example of this phenomenon. Even unions like the United Steelworkers, which was integrated, fought changes that would have given more economic power to Black workers, Kelley told me. “They really become robust in terms of trying to keep so-called ‘unskilled workers’ from moving up the ladder,” he said.

And despite the growing alliance between labor activists and civil rights organizers, union leaders failed to stop industrialists and racist bosses from utilizing racial tension to sow division. “They dropped this threat: ‘If you let these negros organize, they’re going to take your jobs. If they organize and take your jobs, you don’t think that those need to take less wages than you? You’re a skilled steelworker,’” Kelley explained.

“For the vast majority of workers,” Kelley said, “including white workers, racial justice issues are the sort of fulcrum that gives capital even more weight, because they’re able to not just divide workers but create structural forms of racism that put downward pressure on all wages and all working conditions.”

When labor organizations have placed a premium on racial equality and solidarity, they’ve often made huge strides in both workers rights and social justice. Toni Gilpin, a labor historian and author, points to the United Farm Equipment Workers of America as a key example of this: “The FE in Louisville, which was majority white, carried out a constant campaign to press for interracial solidarity in a town where segregation and white racism was endemic.”

Throughout the 40s, the FE fought for racial solidarity in tangent with meaningful economic gains that didn’t benefit members based on race. Gilpin describes this being achieved through active inclusion of Black workers in leadership positions. “They had African Americans in top positions of leadership. And this was a period after WWII when that was not the norm. So they had two executive board members, one executive board member, one vice president who were African American at a time when most unions had no Blacks in such top leadership positions,” Gilpin said. “It also meant that they pressed for contract terms and negotiations with these powerful companies that specifically work to the advantage of African American workers. So for example, they push for plant wide seniority.”

In Minneapolis, standing on the edge of a demonstration near the 5th Precinct, Doni Jones, the president of ATU Local 1005’s Black Caucus, said that Black bus drivers still deal with racist hiring practices and internal comportment aimed explicitly at Black bus drivers. “We’re still the last hired, first fired at Metro Transit,” he told me. “We’re suspended faster. Our punishment is harsher.”

When white drivers are assaulted by passengers and defend themselves, Jones said, they usually keep their jobs; Black drivers, however, are usually fired. Metro Transit did not respond to a request for comment. Since 2016, there have been 200 assaults on Metro Transit bus drivers, and last year there were 46 incidents of spitting.

Rather than provide all its drivers with better safety protocols, Jones said, Metro Transit punishes Black workers and lets white workers off the hook. “They say ‘it was overkill’ or ‘it was out of retaliation,” he continued. “How is it retaliation if someone punches you in the face?”

Originally posted at The Strikewave.