

In the United States Social Struggle Declines, Plateaus: The Most Important Social Conflicts of 2013

Category: Social protests

written by Dan La Botz | March 4, 2014

While there was social struggle and conflict over a variety of issues in the United States in 2013, including an ascending movement in one region, the overall picture was one of diverse and diffuse social movements that had plateaued at a low level. The exceptions were the growing Moral Monday movement in North Carolina, which gained in numbers of participants throughout the year, and the movements of fast food and Walmart workers. While the Occupy Wall Street Movement and a few large labor conflicts of 2011 and 2012—the occupation of the state capitol in Wisconsin, and the Chicago Teachers Union strike— had suggested a rising trajectory of social struggle, in the past year the arc of social conflict and particularly labor conflict descended.[1]

Though social conflict declined, there was a small political shift to the left in some regions, apparently in part as a result of the struggles of the past few years. The issue of economic inequality raised by the Occupy Wall Street Movement of 2011-12 was transformed into political action in 2013. Democrat Bill de Blasio was elected Mayor of New York by a landslide running on a platform opposing the policies of his predecessor Republican Michael Bloomberg that had led to an increase in economic inequality in the nation's largest city.[2] In Lorain, Ohio the city Labor Council, angry with betrayal by the local Democratic Party, ran its own candidates for city council and won. Two dozen independent labor candidates were elected to the council.[3] The Socialist Alternative candidate Khasama Sawant was elected to the Seattle City Council—a virtually unheard of election of a revolutionary socialist (not a social democrat)—running on a platform calling for an increase in the minimum wage to \$15, reflecting both the Occupy movement of 2011 and 2012 and the low-wage worker organizing of 2013. [4] Her election and continued advocacy of the \$15 minimum wage also pressured local Democrats to adopt her position.

Still, in contrast to these symptoms of political change, social struggle declined overall in 2013. This decline of conflict, particularly class conflict, is seen most clearly in the strike statistics. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in 2013 there were only 15 major strikes or lockouts involving 1,000 or more workers that lasted at least one shift, down from 19 in 2012. Major work stoppages in 2013 involved 55,000 workers, down from 148,000 in 2012, with 290,000 workdays lost in 2013 compared to 1.13 million in 2012. The largest of the 2013 strikes involved public employees in New York and California.[5] In terms of union membership, there was no decline in 2013, but neither was there any increase.[6]

What was true of labor struggle was also true of social struggle more generally. The Occupy Wall Street Movement that swept the United States in 2011 and 2012 was severely repressed by local, mostly Democratic Party city governments and their police departments, with many beatings and jailings. The movement declined and then virtually disappeared.[7] No similar national movement arose in 2013, though an important regional movement, Moral Mondays, developed in North Carolina and subsequently spread to other areas.

Still there were in 2013 many other significant protests over environmental issues, racism, LGBT concerns, and labor issues. The largest protests were the Forward on Climate environmental rally in Washington in February, the fast food workers' and Walmart workers' demonstrations held around

the country at various times during the year, the Moral Mondays movement that began in the spring, and the protests of over the July verdict in the Trayvon Martin case that took place in cities throughout the nation. We list more than a dozen important social conflicts that took place here, choosing them for their size and political significance, as well as to show the variety of conflicts that occurred.

The Moral Mondays movement that began in Raleigh, North Carolina, represented the most inspiring movement of 2013 based on its consistently large mobilizations, its continuing use of civil disobedience, the willingness of its participants to face arrest, and its growth and spread to other regions of the state and then to other parts of the South. We turn now to look first at the Moral Monday movement and then at the other movements chronologically and thematically.

Moral Mondays - April - December

Moral Mondays, mass protests accompanied by civil disobedience, began in April of 2013 in response to a series of laws passed by the Republican-dominated legislature of North Carolina and signed by Republican governor Pat McCrory. Elected in 2012, McCrory's party also won the majority of the state Senate and the House and proceeded to pass laws that restricted voting rights to reduce likely Democratic voters, cut social programs, eliminated teacher tenure and cut teachers' salaries, created new regressive taxes, repealed the Racial Justice Act that had allowed death row inmates to challenge their sentences on the basis of discrimination, and limited abortion rights.[8] The state also ended federal unemployment benefits for 70,000 jobless people.[9]

Financing the campaigns of the conservatives who won election and helping to set their ultra-conservative agenda was Art Pope, the wealthy chairman of Variety Wholesalers Corporation and the state budget director. Pope has been a supporter of rightwing think-tanks and Tea Party candidates and has come to embody in the public mind the connection between the wealthy and Republicans and their attack on the poor.[10] Pope, McCrory, and the Republicans thus provoked the Moral Monday movement.

Rev. William J. Barber II, president of the North Carolina National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the inspirer of the movement, and other African American as well as white ministers initiated the protests on April 29, with hundreds of protestors going to the state capital in Raleigh, some entering and occupying the legislature and dozens being arrested for refusing to leave. Labor unions and many union members have been involved in the struggle from early on. The North Carolina AFL-CIO and the independent United Electrical Workers (UE) both mobilized their members for the protests.

The demonstrations taking place on Mondays involved an average of 2,500 protestors with a total of 900 people being arrested for occupying the legislature in 2013. Other demonstrations were held in other North Carolina cities, most of the demonstrations involving thousands and one in Ashville as many as 10,000 people.

The Moral Monday protests made religious and liberal arguments challenging the conservatives and the domination of the wealthy and calling for improvements in the lives of working people and the poor. The North Carolina movement adopted a fourteen point agenda back in 2007 calling for: quality education for all children, a living wage and economic support for low income people, health care for all, a reversal of the state's racist history and practices, same-day voter registration and public financing of elections, assistance for the historically black colleges, fair hiring and contracting practices, affordable housing, an end to racist criminal justice practices, the promotion of environmental justice, collective bargaining for public employees, protection of immigrant rights, strengthening of laws and agencies to protect civil rights, and bringing all troops back from Iraq

now.[11] This agenda has provided a program for the movement.

The first Moral Monday March of 2014 held on February 1 in Raleigh brought out between 80,000 and 100,000 people while at the same time the movement spread to South Carolina and Georgia. The Moral Monday movement has led some of the largest social protest demonstrations in the South since the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.[12] Moral Mondays represented the largest, most sustained, and most significant movement of 2013.

There were no significant protests in January 2013

Forward on Climate Rally - February 2013

Forward on Climate, a coalition of environmental groups demanding that Obama take action on climate change and protesting the Keystone XL pipeline, brought 40,000 people to Washington, D.C.[13] Bill McKibben, the founder of 3.50.org told the rally, "For 25 years our government has basically ignored the climate crisis: now people in large numbers are finally demanding they get to work. We shouldn't have to be here — science should have decided our course long ago. But it takes a movement to stand up to all that money." [14] The mass demonstration had been preceded by smaller demonstrations of prominent people who engaged in civil disobedience and were arrested. Among them were: attorney Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., civil rights leader Julian Bond, Sierra Club executive director Michael Brune, environmental activists McKibben, actress Daryl Hannah, and NASA climate scientist James Hansen as well as 40 others.[15] While Forward on Climate was one of the largest environmental marches in the United States, it had no impact on President Obama or Congress, neither of which took any decisive action to deal with global warming and climate change or any other environmental issue.

Kimany Gray Protests and Disturbances - March 2013

On March 9, New York City Police Department officers shot and killed a 16-year old African American boy named Kimany Gray, claiming that he had adjusted his belt in a suspicious manner, leading them to believe he had a gun and to shoot him. Gray was shot seven times, three times in the back. Police reported that a handgun was found at the scene of the killing, though one eye-witness claimed the boy was unarmed. All agree that Gray never fired a shot. The shooting, so similar to many others across the country where police officers have shot black boys and men, led to protests and riots in the Flatbush area of Brooklyn, New York City, New York.[16]

Following Gray's wake and funeral a few days later, rioters ransacked a drug store and broke police cruisers' window and were in turn pepper sprayed by police. A peaceful vigil for Gray soon turned into two more days of rioting, with mostly African American young men and boys throwing bricks, bottles, and garbage at the police. Police arrested 46 protestors. Peaceful protests by hundreds continued after the riots had subsided.[17]

Protests against Defense of Marriage Act at Supreme Court - March - June

From March through June 2013 there were many demonstrations altogether involving thousands outside the U.S. Supreme Court and at other locations to demand that justices overturn the Defense of Marriage Act, a 1996 federal law that allowed states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages granted in other states and codified such marriages as not legal for all federal purposes, including social security benefits and joint income tax filings.[18] The Supreme Court ruled the part of the law dealing with federal rights and benefits unconstitutional in June of 2013.[19] The question of interstate recognition of gay marriages is still being litigated. The American gay movement, which through its continuing pressure had won an end the U.S. military's "don't ask, don't tell policies" in

2011, also succeeded in 2013 in overcoming parts of the Defense of Marriage Act in 2013.[20] The gay movement fighting for legal equality has been among the most successful of social movements in early twenty-first century.

Anti-Drone Protests - April 13, 2013

Hundreds of protestors participated in demonstrations at the White House in Washington, D.C. and in other American cities against President Barack Obama's use of drones to assassinate enemies of the United States in Pakistan. At the time Pakistan alone had had over 2,800 people killed in drone strikes, over 280 of them civilians.[21] Demonstrations were reported to have been held in Washington, D.C., from across the East Coast and New England, while others participated in joint actions in cities and towns as diverse as San Francisco, Sacramento and Los Angeles, California; St. Louis, Missouri; Albuquerque, New Mexico; New Paltz, New York; Boston, Massachusetts; Tallahassee, Florida (on April 11); and Huntsville, Alabama.[22]. Public pressure led Obama to adopt a more restricted policy on the use of drones, though critics alleged that he was violating it.[23]

Fast-Food Workers Strikes and Protests - April 4, July 29, August, and December

The United States has 200,000 fast-food workers; virtually none of whom are unionized. Turn-over among fast-food workers is about 75 percent, making them exceedingly difficult to organize.[24] Median pay for the almost 150,000 fast food workers in New York City in 2013 was \$9 an hour, or \$18,500 a year, according to the New York Labor Department, approximately \$4,500 lower than Census Bureau's poverty income threshold level for a family of four.[25]

Fast food workers organizing and actions first came to public attention on November 29, 2012, when workers from Burger King, Domino's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, and Wendy's restaurants in New York City struck, demanding higher wages, better working conditions, and the right to form a union without retaliation from management. Many of the workers earned only the minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. While only 100 workers struck, it was the largest strike in the history of the fast-food industry.

The strike, principally organized by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) had the backing of community organizations and NGOs. By April 4, 2013, the number of strikers in New York had grown to 200 while hundreds of others struck in Chicago on April 24, Detroit on May 10, St. Louis on May 9 and 10, Milwaukee on May 15 and Seattle on May 30. The movement culminated on July 29 when approximately 2,200 workers went on strike in all of those cities plus Flint and Kansas City. In August there were simultaneous nationwide strikes with hundreds of workers gathering at work sites in some of the larger cities and in some places occupying the fast food restaurants.[26] In December once again there were one-day strikes by fast-food workers in over 100 cities.[27]

While the union was able to mobilize only about 1 percent of fast-food workers, the efforts had an impact not so much on organizing workplaces as on the debate about the minimum wage. In December 2013 there was another round of strikes and demonstrations aimed principally at raising the national minimum wage to \$15 per hour.[28] Under the pressure of the movement, in February 2014 President Obama called for raising the minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$10.10 per hour. New Jersey voters voted to raise the minimum wage in November; altogether thirteen state raised their minimum wage in 2013.[29]

Workers Strike University of California Hospitals - May 2013 and November 2013

In May 2013 almost 25,000 workers struck the University of California Hospitals in the cities of San Francisco, Davis, Los Angeles, Santa Monica, Irvine, and San Diego. The principal strike by the

American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299 involved 13,000 respiratory therapists, surgical and lab technicians, nursing assistants, and licensed vocational nurses strike over pensions and patient care issues. They were joined by 7,000 cafeteria workers and housekeepers who engaged in a sympathy strike as well as by the Union of Professional and Technical Employees, representing 3,400 other UC hospital employees, among them social workers and pharmacists.[30] These same groups of workers, joined by graduate students and numbering altogether around 35,000, struck again against harassment and intimidation in November as they continued to negotiate a contract.[31]

Walmart Strikes and Protests - April - June - November

Walmart is the second largest public corporation in the world, the largest retailer, the largest employer in the United States and one of its largest corporations. Yet its workforce in the United States remains completely unorganized. Founded in 2011, Our Walmart (Organization United for Respect at Walmart), a group established by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), carried out its first major action in 2012, including Black Friday protests, the nation's big shopping day immediately after Thanksgiving. In the spring of 2013 workers and their supporters confronted store managers in 100 locations to pressure the company to make improvements in the workers' conditions.

In June, just before the company's annual meeting in Bentonville, Arkansas, Our Walmart tried to carry out a work stoppage or strike in the areas where Our Walmart was strongest. Walmart responded by firing or suspending more than sixty workers involved in the actions.[32] The firing of those Walmart workers led Our Walmart to organize in September coordinated protests in 15 cities, among them Dallas, Chicago, Seattle, Maryland, Orlando, Los Angeles, and New York. Thousands participated in the protests and 100 were arrested.[33]

On Black Friday 2013 thousands of Walmart workers and supporters held demonstrations throughout the United States. The rallies held at 1,500 stores in cities and towns across the country demanding salaries of at least \$25,000 per year, more full-time jobs, and an end to the retaliation against Walmart workers involved in union organizing. The company at the time employed two million workers of whom 800,000 earned less than \$25,000 per year and many Walmart workers were being supported by U.S. government social welfare programs because their earnings were so low.[34]

In some cities, there were citations or arrests of Walmart protestors.[35] Walmart also threatened workers who participated in the Black Friday protests and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) filed a complaint against the company for unfair labor practices.[36] The national scope and the thousands of participants in the Walmart demonstrations make them a significant event covered in all of the national news media.

Protests of Verdict in Zimmerman Shooting of Trayvon Martin - July

George Zimmerman, a self-appointed night watchman in Sanford, Florida, pursued, shot, and killed a seventeen year old high school student named Trayvon Martin. The shooting became a widely debated national issue and there were protests nationwide in 2012. When on July 13, 2013 a jury acquitted Zimmerman of the charges of murder and manslaughter, spontaneous, peaceful protests erupted once again in towns and cities across the country.[37] In many cities young African Americans, sometimes joined by whites and Latinos, marched in protest. Rev. Al Sharpton's National Action Network (NAN) then organized protests in 100 cities in which tens of thousands participated.[38]

Concert in Support of Pussy Riot - August

Amnesty International held its second international Pussy Riot solidarity concert in front of the Russian Embassy in Washington, D.C. Pussy Riot band members Masha Alekhina, Nadya Tolokonnikova and Katya Samutsevich were sentenced to two years in penal colonies on August 17, 2012 for their performance of a "Punk Prayer" in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral. While Katya was released on appeal, Nadya and Masha have been imprisoned for more than 16 months at the time of the concert. Russian courts refused in July 2013 to grant parole to either of the two women. Following the Pussy Riot arrests, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law providing for up to three years in prison for public support of actions aimed at insulting religious feelings. Amnesty International considered Masha and Nadya to be prisoners of conscience and campaigned for their immediate release. The concert featured several bands, dramatizations, and visual displays as well as speakers.[39]

Anniversary March on Washington - August 28

Tens of thousands—as many as 200,000—participated in the Fiftieth Anniversary March on Washington, half a century after the historic march at which Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. made his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.[40] Participating in the march were many labor unions, church groups, African American civil rights organizations, and some leftist political groups. The march, however, was not only a commemorative event, and is included in this account of the social conflicts of 2013 because many of those who marched carried signs and banners that advocated for other ongoing causes and struggles for social justice. Many carried placards calling for justice for Trayvon Martin, for ending racism, for ending the mass incarcerations of the “new Jim Crow,” for creating jobs, for a \$15 minimum wage, for taxing the rich, for protecting voting rights, for immigration reform, for reproductive rights, for gay rights, for saving the planet, and for many other issues.[41]

Demonstrations against U.S. Military Involvement in Syria - August and September

Hundreds of protestors joined rallies against U.S. military involvement in Syria in August and September, though the motivations of the participants were often different. Joining the protests were pacifists who oppose all violence on principle, opponents of a U.S. imperialist intervention in Syria who also opposed Bashar-al Assad and the Baath Party, and others, both Syrians and some American leftists, who supported Assad and the Baath government because they believed it was a socialist regime. The demonstrations in cities like New York, Washington, D.C., Boston and Chicago numbered in the hundreds.[42] Some anti-war groups attributed the fact that Obama didn't launch military strikes against Syria to the power of the protest movement; others noted that Obama was very reluctant to get involved and thus welcomed the Russian chemical weapons agreement as a way to avoid U.S. involvement.

Demonstration against the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) - September

Opponents of the Trans-Pacific Partnership that would create a new international trade agreement in the Pacific region protested on September 23 at the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative. They carried banner calling for a democratic process and for the release of the text of the treat. The treaty being negotiated between the United States, Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam would cover approximately 40% of the global economy. Protestors fear that the agreement will not protect the environment and workers' rights and that it will transform and endanger existing agriculture. Organizers of the small but very visible protest included FlushTheTPP.org, the Backbone Campaign, Veterans for Peace, Codepink, and Earth First!. [43]

Gay Rights Protests against Russian Anti-Gay Law and Olympics - September - November

Gay rights activists demonstrated in front of the New York Metropolitan Opera House on September 22—where Tchaikovsky’s “Eugene Onegin,” was being performed by visiting Russian stars Anna Netrebko, the popular Russian diva and Valery Gergiev artistic director of the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg—to protest new anti-gay laws enacted in Russia before the Olympics were to take place there. LGBT activists, some in drag and dressed as opera divas themselves, held up the gay rainbow banner and distributed fliers about the issues. Inside just before the opera began, a member of a group called the Family Circle shouted out “Putin, end your war on gays!” and “Anna and Valery your silence is killing Russian gays!” Security guards ejected them from the theater.[44]

Some two dozen LGBT activists also attempted to disrupt the U.S. Olympic Committee’s 100-day countdown event at Times Square at the end of October carrying a banner reading, “Don’t Buy Putin’s Lies.”[45] In November, Queer Nation gay activists took their protests to the New York Stock Exchange’s Third Annual Russia Day celebration with a giant rainbow banner emblazoned “Thugs.”[46]

Immigration Protests - October - November

Eight Democratic Party U.S. Congressional Representatives and 150 other protestors were arrested as thousands of demonstrators rallied outside the U.S. Capitol in October to demand action on immigration.[47] The arrests followed a larger rally on the Mall, an event that had initially been threatened with cancellation because of the U.S. government shutdown, but which was allowed to proceed.[48] The most recent fight for immigration reform began in 2004 and has continued for a decade but has failed to pressure Congress to act.[49] The demonstration in October 2013 also failed to move Congress.

A group of immigration activists, who had been fasting on the mall for several weeks, were visited by President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama in November. Obama told the activist that he appreciated their protest which had called attention to the issue and told them that he was hopeful that immigration reform would pass, though that proved to be misplaced optimism.[50]

Government Shutdown Protests

The United States government was shut down for 16 days in October because of the failure of Congress to pass a budget, resulting in the furlough of 800,000 Federal workers, a delay in pay for another 1.3 million, and reductions in services that affected businesses and workers alike, as well as programs serving millions from pre-school children to the elderly. The Tea Party Republicans and other rightwing Republican legislators had been principally responsible for the shutdown. Standard and Poor’s, the financial services agency, said that the shutdown cost the American economy \$24 billion dollars. Finally on day sixteen, Congress voted to fund the government and everybody went back to work.

The American Federation of Government Employees, the National Treasury Employees Union, and other unions representing federal workers organized protests in the nation’s capital and at federal facilities across the country. Thousands walked picketlines in various cities, towns, and rural areas. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka stated, “Their actions remind us that government workers are proud public servants who often do selfless, courageous work. Because our government shut down, these people are working but don’t know if or when they’ll get paid.”[51] In the end, Congress voted to pay the furloughed workers, even though they had not been sent home from work. The Congressional vote was less a victory for the unions than the recognition by Republicans that the government shutdown had divided their party and cost them public support.

Detroit Bankruptcy Protests - December

The economic crisis in Detroit, Michigan, devastated by plant closures over several decades leading to falling revenues from both businesses and workers, had led Governor Rick Snyder to impose an “emergency manager” to run the city. Then in July the city, with a debt of \$18.5 billion, filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy, though the matter remained in the courts until Dec. 3 when a federal judge ruled that the city could declare bankruptcy and that the city’s pension obligations to its workers were protected.[52] Unions, churches and community leaders organized demonstrations involving about a hundred union members and allies outside the court while hearings went on.[53] The small protests had no impact on the court’s decision.

Illinois Teacher Protests - December

Teachers, nurses, and other public employees demonstrated in Springfield, Illinois, against a bill that cut retirement benefits of current and future state employees. The teachers testimony against the bill and their protests failed, however, to prevent its approval.[54] The union announced that it would pursue legal challenges, and did in 2014.[55]

As the protests in Washington, D.C. over immigration reform and in Michigan and Illinois over workers’ pensions indicated, social and labor movements carried out only weak challenges to authority in 2013; their attempts to pressure the government and its conservative and austerity policies generally failed. While the fast food workers and Walmart workers movement held some impressive national demonstrations and strikes, they mobilized a very small percentage of workers in those industries and failed almost completely in their efforts to organize workers into unions. Still, these were the first time unions attempted on a national scale to organize such low-paid workers in the food industry and retail stores. The Moral Mondays movement represents an exciting and growing movement for greater social justice, for jobs, higher pay, and a fairer and more egalitarian society, but so far it has not become strong enough to overturn the Republican Party in North Carolina, or in any other Southern state. Its spread throughout the South, however, suggests that it will have greater weight and more power in 2014, perhaps leading to movements in other parts of the country as well.

This article was written for the University of Barcelona’s multi-national Annual of Social Struggle (Anuari del Conflict Social, Universitat de Barcelona) that provides a yearly account of social conflict in many countries of the world.

Thanks to my friends Mike Hirsch and Steven Shalom for his help with this article.

NOTES:

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