THE POLITICS OF LABOUR AND RACE IN THE USA

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Understanding the question of race and labour in the USA can be helped by reference to a story. In the mid-1700s there was a slave conspiracy in the New York colony. Like many slave conspiracies this was uncovered before it could be hatched. What was unusual about this particular conspiracy was that the rebels were both Africans and Irish. Prior to their execution, the rebels were interviewed and asked about the objectives of the planned uprising. The Africans answered that they sought to kill all the white people. No surprise there. The Irish were interviewed as well. They answered, in turn, to kill all the white people – i.e. Irish people in the Americas had yet to become what we know as ‘white’. The ironic contrast, of course, can be found one hundred years later in the New York 1863 Draft Riots, where Irish immigrants conducted a pogrom/mass lynching targeted at freed Africans, as a way of venting their anger about the Civil War and the unfair draft laws. By the mid-1860s, the Irish were well on their way to becoming ‘white’.¹

While the Irish, as Europeans, could become ‘whites’, what is fascinating is that they were not immediately assumed to be white.² In other words, a process had to unfold in order for the Irish to become white, at least in the manner in which we have come to understand that term. Thus, whiteness, like racial identity in general, must be understood as a socio-political construct rather than anything fundamentally rooted in biology. It is this kind of understanding that underlies the conception of US capitalism as a racialized capitalism. US capitalism does not exist in the abstract, to which race is then added on. Race as a socio-political construct, and racist oppression, are centre factors in comprehending the history and politics of the USA.³

Capitalism engenders competition within the working class. This competition is not a Machiavellian conspiracy, but exists at the heart of the system. The
competition is one for limited resources. The resource may be employment, income, or, as much of the world is presently discovering, it may be water. In any case, the nature of the system is such as to promote competition. There are never enough resources – no matter what the form – to serve the existing population because of the manner in which resources are divided up. The surplus, whether the surplus value produced by the workers themselves, or the societal surplus, is not up for some sort of equitable distribution. All of this leaves aside intent. Intent is irrelevant. It is for that reason that capitalism is correctly described as an amoral system. There is no morality contained in it. The competition for limited resources places one section of the working class at odds with other sections. That internal contradiction within the working class is a source of delight for the capitalists. Crabs in the barrel, so to speak. In response to this competition, trade unions first developed, originally as guilds and later as the organizations that we recognize today.

This basic understanding is critical because the divide-and-conquer element of capitalism is not something that has to be introduced from outside the system. It is inherent to the system, and has served to undermine threats to the system. The tension that the original settlers faced when arriving in the North American colonies between the labouring population and the colonial ruling class was relieved to a great extent by the racial divide that was created by the ruling class within the labouring population. It was in this context that one could witness the fusion of what has come to be known as ‘race’ with the capitalist system. As Manning Marable has been fond of saying, US capitalism can never be understood as some sort of capitalism in the abstract, but must be understood as racial capitalism.

Race has been the trip-wire of progressive and radical movements in the USA. The central argument of this essay is that the failure by the bulk of organized labour, including many progressives and radicals, to address race and racism, has undermined efforts to develop a consistent class-consciousness within the US working class. US labour’s historical tendency to define its constituency in exclusively ‘white’ terms, to match the racial nature of US capitalism, has been one of the greatest limitations on US trade unionism. But even within racially inclusive unionism there remains the problem of the resolution of real world contradictions. Even a trade unionism that is inclusive, i.e., that seeks to unite all who can be united, can still miss the fundamental nature of racial capitalism in the USA and its impact on the working class. This flaw, or blind spot, can lead even some of the best leaders to believe that it is possible to build a successful, class-conscious, or even a trade union-conscious movement without an anti-racist analysis and practice. The core of this view, which can be described as pragmatic idealism, is that building a movement around a set of issues which everyone shares in common can overcome any differences – real or perceived – which might exist. This idealism downplays the material basis for racism, which is white privilege and racial/national oppression, reinforced by the ideology of white supremacy. Despite repeated evidence that pragmatic idealism does not
work, it remains a largely hegemonic view – albeit repeatedly challenged – within US trade unionism.

**AMERICAN LABOUR AND RACE IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

‘Organized labor, for the most part be it radical or conservative, thinks and acts, in the terms of the White Race’.4 Thus did Ben Fletcher, a leading Black organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World in the early part of the twentieth century, put the issue of exclusivist American trade unionism. The USA, as objectively a settler state, has been relatively successful in absorbing into full citizenship successive waves of European immigrants, but it has found it more problematic to be inclusive of indigenous or pre-existing populations on land that was expropriated – e.g., Native Americans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans. And even more problematic for the USA, given that from its colonial origins it had to define itself in terms of the realities and the legacy of racial slavery, has been its population of African Americans. This dilemma had already made its way into the burgeoning US trade union movement in the 1800s. What could then be identified as a trade union movement was for all intents and purposes a movement of white men in the northern states. It immediately fractured on the question of slavery, some taking a position in favour of slavery, and others in opposition to it, while still others took the view that it was not something on which labour should take a position.5

While this debate was quite obviously about race, it was also at its core about competition within the working class for limited resources. The leadership of the growing trade union movement, both before and after the Civil War, was torn over how to resolve this very fundamental contradiction, always fearing that an inclusive strategy might have the effect of reducing the wages and benefits of the core workforce. The alternative view held that the exclusive approach needed to be challenged in its fundamentals. This debate never focused solely on African-Americans, although that was to be a major flashpoint during the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century. The mid to late 1800s saw the emergence of an Asian workforce in the USA that was actively excluded from the ranks of organized labour. One of the early efforts at independent ‘working class’ political action, for example, was the Workingmen’s Party in California. The *raison d’être* of this party, however, was opposition to Asian labour.

But long before workers of colour played central roles in white-led labour formations (e.g., the Industrial Workers of the World), they consistently found means of self-organization. At that time, however, understanding labour in these terms meant defining the labour movement more broadly than was generally accepted. Lerone Bennett, Jr., in his insightful work, *The Shaping of Black America*, describes a Black worker insurgency that immediately followed the Civil War:

> Even before the Radical Reconstruction governments were installed, black workers sprang into action, staging sit-down demonstrations and strikes. In 1865 black washwomen organized a union in Jackson, Mississippi, and
demanded what a Southern newspaper called ‘exorbitant’ prices for laundry. The next year, in August, black Union veterans employed at the iron factories in Elyton (later known as Birmingham) struck for higher wages and were driven out of town. Three months later a New York Times correspondent reported from South Carolina that the freedmen were organizing unions to force concessions from the employers … He said the movement ‘is entirely spontaneous on the part of the freedmen’ and has the ‘symptoms of something very like a Northern “strike”’.6

This Southern movement, however, for all intents and purposes did not happen, at least from the standpoint of white labour. Organized labour during this same period was basically defined by the activities of (mainly) white men, many of whom were active in the development of the National Labor Union, an early attempt at a federation. Indeed, workers of colour – largely African-American – were also involved in the development of what came to be known as the Colored National Labor Union when they were excluded from membership in the all-white NLU. Progressive historians, such as the late Philip S. Foner, gave such formations respectful and legitimate attention, but most established labour history has placed them on the sidelines. Such a misunderstanding or misreading of history leads one to see the labour movement as limited to the official – i.e., white-dominated – unions.

The clash between a trade unionism representing a consistent inclusive democracy and a trade unionism representing exclusiveness did not always break down on strictly racial terms. Nevertheless, the often-racial character of this split was regularly quite graphic. In 1903, for example, a labour formation known as the Japanese-Mexican Labor Union (situated on the West Coast of the USA) applied for a charter from the American Federation of Labor. The legendary AFL President Samuel Gompers offered a charter on condition that the Japanese workers were excluded. The response by the union was poignant:

I beg to say in reply that our Japanese brothers here were the first to recognize the importance of cooperating and uniting in demanding a fair wage scale … In the past we have counseled, fought and lived on very short rations with our Japanese brothers, and toiled with them in the fields, and they have been uniformly kind and considerate. We would be false to them and to ourselves and to the cause of unionism if we now accepted privileges for ourselves which are not accorded to them. We are going to stand by men who stood with us in the long, hard fight which ended in victory over the enemy. We therefore respectfully petition the A.F. of L. to grant us a charter under which we can unite all sugar beet and field laborers of Oxnard without regard to their color or race.7

A myriad other examples in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be used to demonstrate the actuality of self-organization among workers of colour, and the resistance of the mainstream labour movement to this. But the problem went beyond the labour establishment, as even militant trade unionists
reflected an orientation shaped by the settler nature of the USA. Take, for example, the International Seamen’s Union of the nineteenth century, whose orientation could have been described as militant, if not radical. It was highly critical of capitalism, but at the same time, it was white supremacist, not only in terms of internal segregation but also in terms of its stand toward Asian workers and Asia generally. For the ISU, in other words, there appeared to be no inconsistency between its militant critique of capitalism and its white supremacy.

Despite dramatic moments of fundamental restructuring of the union movement, such as the shift from a local (particularly municipal) to national focus, or when industrial unionism was created with the founding of what became the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1935, the bulk of organized labour – including many ‘inclusive’ unions – has historically been unwilling to tackle this contradiction on the inclusionist side of the equation. The unfulfilled promise of the CIO, particularly with regard to matters of race, is documented in dramatic detail in Foner’s classic work, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker.*

In the 1930s several different ideological points of view pushed the US union movement from its narrow trades perspective to industrial unionism. The opposition within the union movement to industrial unionism (whole plant or sector organizing), in this case, came from those traditional union bureaucrats who believed that the maintenance of the trades orientation (organizing by trade skill) was the best way to preserve their own way of life and the well-being of those they conceived the trade union movement to be for, i.e., white, relatively well-paid workers. Change was brought about by an alliance between pragmatists and a broadly-defined Left, which advocated an inclusive unionism from a variety of socialist perspectives. The pragmatists addressed the practical needs of a union movement where the nature of work was shaped by Fordism and thus required a more practical way of organizing large groups of workers in order to build and maintain the union movement. The left viewed industrial unionism as potentially a more effective way to organize workers, providing them with the opportunity to improve their day-to-day lives while, at the same time, giving them an education about the need for class struggle and the overthrow of the capitalist system itself. Since the creation of the CIO, leftists have had most impact on the union movement when they were able to influence the direction of pragmatic trade unionists like John L. Lewis. One reason they were able to do this was the credibility that they brought to the table as a result of their leadership and influence in particular unions within the CIO.

The CIO, and to some extent the American Federation of Labor (from which the CIO split), led to the unionization of hundreds of thousands of African-Americans and their subsequent rise from often abject poverty. This said, it was also the case that the CIO, which had a significant left-wing presence until the late 1940s, had its own limitations. Fundamental to these was the fact that while the CIO unions made a commitment to organize workers of colour, they were uneven in challenging structural discrimination in the workplace. This was especially clear in the way unions like the United Steelworkers of America reinforced
traditional or de facto seniority arrangements, ‘leading inevitably to unrealized expectations for many African American workers’. While some of the left-led unions had a different practice, most notably the Packinghouse Workers, and the Food, Tobacco and Agricultural Workers, this was not the dominant reality of the CIO. The way CIO collective bargaining agreements froze in place existing discriminatory employment practices through the modern era was exemplified by the case of the General Dynamics Quincy (Massachusetts) shipyard, which as late as the mid-1970s employed approximately 5000 workers, represented by Local 5 of the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America. The employer traditionally had carried out little in the way of affirmative action in order to hire workers of colour, but after receiving some major contracts to build liquefied natural gas tankers, there was a significant increase in hiring of women and workers of colour. But workers of colour tended to be hired into the worst departments, e.g., welding, cleaning and sandblasting; and since seniority in the shipyard was by department, a worker in the welding department could accumulate years of seniority in that department, they would start at the bottom of the seniority ladder if he or she attempted to move to a more skilled department. The union leadership never challenged this sort of seniority system. In fact, when a reform movement in the local union attempted to raise the problems with it, the conservative leadership of the local united in its defence.

Many of these issues emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s as flashpoints for rank and file rebellion on the part of workers of colour and the development of what has come to be known as the caucus movement of that period. By this time, the US labour movement had lost whatever dynamic potential for change industrial unionism had represented. In the post-war McCarthy era, the pragmatists moved deliberately towards the traditional union forces. The left’s growing isolation in the CIO, and ultimately in the AFL–CIO, could be seen quite clearly in the isolation of leftists around their opposition to the Marshall Plan, and became still more acute when eleven ‘red’ unions were purged from the union central. Under the leadership of George Meany, the AFL–CIO institutionalized anti-communism within the union movement. By-laws were written to exclude communists and other leftists. Internationally, the AFL–CIO became known as the labour arm for the enforcement of US foreign policy. Domestically, during the Vietnam era, local Central Labor Councils were threatened with losing their charters if they officially opposed US policy in Vietnam. The fear of leftists infiltrating the AFL–CIO, the discriminatory policies of unions, and the AFL–CIO’s pro-Viet Nam War stance all increased the distance between the union movement and other social movements that should have been close allies, e.g., the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement.

THE BACKLASH OF THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

So long as the labour–capital social accord held through the post-war boom, the deep divisions within the working class based on race, gender, ethnicity and national origin, not to mention political and religious views, did not greatly
disturb the US labour movement. But the breakdown of this ‘deal’ in the 1970s was accompanied by a right-wing backlash with regard to race and racism, which starkly reopened these divisions. The essence of the backlash came down to this: yes, there has been racial discrimination in the USA, but the various Civil Rights statutes have remedied this. No further action is necessary; indeed, any further action amounts to reverse racism, or reverse discrimination targeted at whites. In a nutshell, there were no longer issues of racial discrimination, let alone racist/national oppression in the USA. The argument was compelling and persuasive to many white people who were not prepared to accept the consequences of hundreds of years of slavery, colonialism, Jim Crow segregation and de facto segregation.

Even before the accord’s breakdown, indeed almost simultaneously with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, a neo-conservative racial agenda or project emerged which transformed the issue of race from a group or societal issue to an individual ‘problem’. It alleged that racism no longer existed; because the laws of the land had changed, the ability of an individual to achieve has become the only significant key to personal success. This concept of reverse discrimination and the right-wing neo-conservative agenda reached the national spotlight in the Bakke Supreme Court case of 1978. This right-wing argument achieved the force of presidential power when Ronald Reagan embraced it.

But what was termed a conservative backlash turned out to actually be a more complex phenomenon integrally related to the economic restructuring of capitalism. This restructuring, in response to the stagnation of the economy, eventually produced what we have come to know as neoliberal globalization, which has had a direct impact on race and racism in the USA through its effect on the security and incomes of the white working class. The decline in average wages, which only started to bottom out around 1996, pushed down the real wages of US workers to around what they were in the late 1960s. This wage decline was accompanied by a wealth polarization: whereas the upper 10 per cent of the US population owned approximately 49 per cent of the wealth in 1976, by 1999 it held no less than 73 per cent. The response by workers has been, by and large, individual and familial. There are many reasons for this that go beyond the scope of this essay. One of the most important has been the crackdown on unions by employers and the government, as well as lethargy within the trade union movement. In any event, US workers have worked more hours, have had to depend on more members of their family going to work, and have had to go into deep personal debt in order to ward off a decline in their living standard.

This has had a crushing psychological impact on the white working class. Brought up to believe that their living standard would increase over time and that the living standard for their children would always be greater than their own, they have found that none of these beliefs has turned out to be valid. As capitalism has restructured, and in particular, as manufacturing has reorganized and in many cases shifted offshore, their worlds have unraveled. While many people
benefited from the economic expansion of the 1990s, many sectors of the working class continued to take major hits.

Significant numbers of white workers and sections of the petty bourgeoisie have responded to this assault by retreating into various forms of right-wing populism, protectionism and xenophobia. The changing complexion of the country with the entrance of new immigrants (overwhelmingly from Asia and Latin America, but also from Africa and parts of Europe) helped foster a siege mentality which, while not being unique to the USA, began to effect a reconstruction of race in the United States. This energized the political Right, bringing support for politicians like Pat Buchanan and others. One of the intriguing aspects of this right-wing populism is its racial message, encouraging, whether subtly or not so subtly, the notion that there has been a betrayal of white people by the multinational corporations. Right-wing populism argues, in essence, that it does not pay to be white any more. The deal, which these movements suggest existed between white people and capital, has been called off. Generally, right-wing populism puts the blame for this on Blacks and immigrants; capitalism as such is rarely the target.

The irony is that right-wing populism has part of the story correct (which is what makes their message so dangerous). The ‘deal’ between sections of capital and the more organized sector of the working class has been called off. For white workers, particularly in the USA, the expectation of a continued rise in living standards was tied directly to an implicit assumption that there would be a cushion beneath them – a cushion made up of workers of colour – to protect them from the ravages of capitalism. A combination of the struggles of people of colour as well as the threat to white living standards has undermined any sense of safety. A high level of stress and anxiety, even during the so-called boom period of the ’90s, pervaded the working class.

The result has been that since the mid-1970s advances in the anti-racist struggle have been halted and, indeed, reversed. While this period of destabilization and decline ensued, it did not result in a levelling of conditions between whites and workers of colour. With regard to African-Americans, the period from 1979 till at least the mid-1990s saw a rise of inequality in wealth and income not only between African-Americans and whites, but also among African-Americans.16 A similar tendency over the same period of time could be seen in the situation facing Latino workers.17 For African-American men, the situation has become very stark. In 1979, for instance, Black men earned $0.77 for every $1.00 earned by white men. By 1991, this had dropped to $0.65 for every $1.00 earned by white men. The gap between the pay of Black women and white women showed a similar pattern until the late 1980s, but then started to move in the other direction, so that by 1992 Black women earned $0.89 for every $1.00 for white women.18

These racialized wage gaps are due to a number of factors. The most prominent relate to manufacturing employment and unionization. The wages of Black men have been hit hard by the contraction of heavy manufacturing and the
decline in unionization. Research also suggests that workers in organizations with higher percentages of women are paid lower starting wages; and, especially in service industries, companies are hiring higher percentages of women. This larger percentage of women on lower wages may be bringing down the overall average wages for all women, thus contributing to the decline in the wage differential between Black women and White women.

Blacks continue to experience more long-term unemployment than whites. The period of industrial contraction also had a disproportionate impact on workers of colour in other ways. In the period 1982–97, African-American participation in jobs such as machine operators, assemblers, tenders, fabricators, handlers, helpers and labourers shrank by 5 per cent, compared with a 2 per cent drop for whites. At the same time, African-American participation in sales jobs increased by 3 per cent, compared with 0.5 per cent for whites.

Much was made of falling poverty rates with the economic expansion of the 1990s. But in good times or bad, the racial differential continues to exist. In 1997, during a supposed boom, the poverty rate for African-Americans and Latinos was more than double that of whites (27 per cent compared with 11 per cent). One important point to note about this is that the common assumption that being below the poverty line must mean being on unemployment is inaccurate. Working poverty has become a part of the landscape of the USA. Roughly a fifth of Latinos and African-Americans work at the low end of the employment ladder in low-paid service jobs. This compares with slightly more than 10 per cent of whites. Statistics such as these demonstrate the continued reality of the racial differential, particularly when it comes to African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and many Asians. Whether in areas of employment or housing, or encounters with the police and incarceration, the racial differential runs through US society as real as any wall a society can build. Despite this, far too many white workers go on believing that either racial discrimination has ended entirely, or that it has minimal consequences on the workforce today. For many whites, their own decline plus a racial blind spot made it difficult to grasp what has been happening to workers of colour.

CHANGING COMPLEXION

Much has been made of increased immigration over the last twenty years. This is a complicated picture. The number of immigrants relative to the existing population was higher in the first half of the 1990s than in the 1950s, but quite a bit lower than in the early part of the twentieth century. What had changed were the countries of origin. While the early twentieth century witnessed immigrants from Europe, the most recent wave of immigration, as mentioned earlier, has been largely driven by migrants from Asia and Latin America. This must be seen in the context of global economic changes and migration. Global poverty, war and economic reorganization are driving a phenomenal wave of immigration, and few labour movements have a clue about how to address this sea change. It is hardly surprising, given its chequered past, that the US labour movement is no exception.
The US trade union movement has a long history of both resisting immigration as well as organizing new ‘white’ immigrants. This dichotomy reflects the exclusion/inclusion contradictions addressed earlier. Amidst the myriad challenges for the US union movement that this wave of immigration presents, is the way it has accompanied economic restructuring. As always, employers, as they have traditionally, have targeted those sectors of the workforce which they have determined to be the most vulnerable. In a fascinating study of the electronics industry in southern California, M. Patricia Fernandez-Kelly explored the hiring policies that led to very clear ethnic niches being established. One of the issues that she examined was the rationale for the low numbers of African-Americans in the workforce. Her findings are noteworthy:

In addition to the connections established by workers with members of a common ethnic, immigrant, or gender group, we considered the preferences of employers. From that vantage point, the contrast between the level of incorporation of Blacks and Hispanics in the Southern California electronics industry is related to varying perceptions about the groups in question. Managers stated their preference for Hispanic workers, particularly the foreign-born. These groups are seen by employers as more ‘diligent,’ ‘hard-working,’ and ‘loyal’ than native-born Americans, especially those of African descent. The opinion emerged in several of our conversations that Asians are almost as desirable as Hispanics for assembly work. However, employers complained that Asians tended to be ruthlessly competitive and, therefore, less loyal to individual companies. Echoing a widespread feeling, a manager told us that ‘[i]n a flash, Asians will drop us for a 10 cent difference in wages’. As to Blacks, they are generally assumed to be less reliable, more likely to make demands, to claim rights, and to seek the backing of unions.26

Entire industries have been reshaped by the immigration patterns of the last twenty years. Two that stand out are building services (janitorial) and poultry. In both cases, employers have made a conscious decision to change hiring patterns in such a way as to seek out Latino immigrants and cut back on the African-Americans, a significant point in that African-Americans were often the major segment of the workforce.

In the Los Angeles janitorial industry, a conflict of interest emerged between Latinos and African-Americans in the mid-’90s. Down to the 1980s the janitorial workforce was largely African-American. In the 1980s, the janitorial industry restructured. Janitors were no longer employed by building-owners but instead by independent contractors. In a few short years, the janitorial workforce became low-paid Latino immigrants. This process destabilized the union representing this sector (the Service Employees International Union, Local 399), which had to reorganize the entire sector. Black workers, having been the core of this sector in earlier times, now felt excluded and ignored. While the new Latino workforce in commercial buildings came to be largely organized, the conflict of interest between the Latinos and African-Americans went unresolved.
When these exploded within Local 399 in 1995 – resulting in a trusteeship by SEIU – due to a political struggle between a dissident group (largely Latino) and the old-line leadership (which was largely Anglo), African-American workers, leaders and staff were largely on the side-lines. There was some feeling among African-American staff that they were on the verge of being displaced by Latinos and had lost any influence within the Local. The trustee of the local, Mike Garcia, paid close attention to these simmering contradictions and while fighting to increase Latino power in the Local, made significant overtures to the African-American staff, leaders and members as well.

In the poultry industry, tensions between African-Americans and Latinos have grown over the years as well. The poultry industry, located to a significant extent in the southern states of the USA, has largely employed African-Americans and poorer whites. Over the last fifteen or so years, this has changed dramatically. Latino immigrants have come to represent a significant section of the workforce, if not a majority in some places. This demographic change coincided with greater emphasis being placed on organizing by the official trade union movement. Thus, a response in some sections of Black America runs something like this: ‘Why weren’t the unions interested in organizing the poultry industry when the workforce was largely African-American? Now that it is majority or nearly majority Latino, the unions are talking about organizing. What’s in it for us?’

The implications of this for the union movement have been profound. Not only have employer hiring policies created tensions between Latinos and African-Americans, the new immigration patterns have helped to redefine race in the USA, and for organized labour too. Until quite recently, racial relations in the USA were largely determined by the black/white dichotomy (though not so much in the West). This is no longer the case. The emergence of Latinos as the largest minority group (though themselves quite diverse), and the rise in Asian and African immigration numbers, have changed this relationship. This does not mean that anti-Black racism is any less important, but that African-Americans feel increasingly marginalized, while a right-wing move is underway to incorporate segments of Latinos and Asians (and some African-Americans) into the dominant bloc. This was evidenced in the mid-1990s in California where a right-wing ballot initiative attacking illegal immigrants (Proposition 187) was approved by the voters. Clearly aimed at hitting Latino and Asian immigrants, and carrying with it subtle and not so subtle racist messages, the initiative was supported by a significant percentage – though not a majority – of African-American, Latino and Asian voters. Its appeal among African-Americans lay in the notion that Latino immigrants in particular were taking their jobs. These divisions gained national attention again in the 2001 Los Angeles mayoral election that pitted the local AFL-CIO unions and Latino-backed Antonio R. Villaraigosa against the African-American supported James Hahn, a white candidate and son of a ‘legendary’ white politician who had been favourably disposed towards African-Americans. Although both were liberal Democrats, the fear of growing immigrant power aligned conservative whites and African-
Americans in favour of Hahn, who won the election: 86 per cent of African-Americans voted for Hahn while 86 per cent of Latinos voted for Villaraigosa. The tensions around limited resources and the shifting terrain of defining who is ‘white’ in America’s racialized capitalism squarely confronts organized labour as it attempts to find its own basis for growth and renewal.

In Los Angeles, at the same time, in an example of Black and Brown unity, the Labor Community Strategy Center and the Bus Riders Union waged an eight-year civil rights battle for the right of workers of colour, regardless of immigration status, to have environmentally safe and affordable public transportation. Charging racial discrimination against all people of colour, this community movement won a Consent Decree that required the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority to buy hundreds of environmentally safe buses to meet the transportation needs of working-class communities of colour. Victory was finally realized when the Supreme Court of the United States refused to hear appeal from the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority. In addition to organizing a multiracial and multi-ethnic constituency, members of the Labor Community Strategy Center and the Bus Riders Union were able to build international ties and support with their ‘social justice’ approach by developing and implementing an explicitly anti-racist, anti-neoliberal and anti-imperialist action plan.28

A ‘social justice’ approach that has been taken to the issue of racial workforce competition in North Carolina is also noteworthy. A state that until a decade ago was largely marked by a black/white dichotomy has witnessed a dramatic demographic change. An influx of Latino immigrants has altered the social and political complexion of the state including its workforce composition. This has been observed in various industrial sectors, including agriculture, poultry, hogs, hotels and restaurants. In the agricultural sector, there is now little racial and ethnic workforce competition given that the workforce is overwhelmingly Latino. The hog and poultry industries, however, are sites of intense struggle. The non-union hog industry has a legacy of racial stratification that has only been increased with the influx of Latinos. Thus, there are jobs reserved for African-Americans; for Native Americans; for Whites; and now for Latinos. The stratification is expressed in different ways, including but not limited to wages. North Carolina trade union leader Ajamu Dillahunl described a de facto ‘oath of secrecy’ that exists in the industry whereby workers are discouraged from revealing their actual wages, lest the racially determined wage differentials be revealed. In the poultry industry a similar pattern of racial stratification and ethnic replacement exists. An industry that until the 1990s was largely African-American has witnessed a dramatic decline of Black workers, replaced by Latino immigrants. The same is true of the North Carolina hotel and restaurant industries.

The historical irony of these patterns is that it appears that ‘labor agents’ (a term used at the turn of the twentieth century, which should actually be ‘employer agents’) are being used to recruit workers from Mexico for various jobs in the USA. These workers come to the USA with little understanding of its racial dynamics, and others lack any knowledge of its history – and legacy – of racial slavery.
There have been various progressive responses to the challenge of racial/ethnic workforce contradictions in North Carolina. One of the most interesting is the African-American/Latino Alliance forged between the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) led by Baldemar Velasquez, and the Black Workers for Justice, a labour/community organization dating back to the early 1980s. FLOC has been organizing agricultural workers in North Carolina who face horrendous conditions of employment. Though in the agricultural workforce, as noted above, there is little racial/ethnic workforce competition, the leaders of both of these organizations recognized that building Black/Brown unity was of strategic importance. For FLOC, winning support for their organizing particularly at the Mount Olive pickles company, necessitated broad outreach to the African-American community. African-American support would both help in addressing broader community tensions, as well as placing significant pressure on the employer to respect the right of workers to organize trade unions.

Unfortunately few unions have had the visionary or ‘social justice’ approach of FLOC, or of the Black Workers for Justice or the Bus Riders Union (neither of the latter two organizations is a trade union). It is far more common for a trade union to attempt to conduct organizing efforts without reaching out to community-based organizations. It is also quite common for unions to attempt to ignore racial/ethnic/gender contradictions, hoping that with an emphasis on the common economic struggle such contradictions will disappear.

THE NEED FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE UNIONISM

The AFL-CIO’s ‘Union Cities’ program – in an effort to reinvigorate the central labour councils – opened the door for new ideas to be discussed and contributed to such changes as the shift from an anti-immigrant stance to one that now calls for full amnesty for illegal immigrants. ‘Union Cities’, which emphasized the importance of union organizing, accountability of politicians, community partnerships and increasing the number of women union leaders and union leaders of colour, was an attempt by pragmatic and Leftist trade unionists to reorient the American union movement and redirect union resources to organizing the unorganized. Also contained in the ‘Union Cities’ program was recognition by some in the US union movement that if organizing were to occur on a large enough scale to make a difference, strategic ties had to be made with significant, progressive, social movements. The essence of this ‘social movement unionism’ approach is thus the rebuilding of a sense of being a movement within US trade unionism, and creating connections with progressive social movements. We agree on the importance of social movement unionism, but we believe that within a capitalist state social movement unionism is insufficient to change unions in the way that is needed. While there are often only semantic differences among those who use various terms for more progressive trade unionism (e.g., class struggle unionism, transformative unionism, social movement unionism), we want to make a distinctive case for what we call ‘social justice unionism’.
What is meant by this? First, that there must be a break with idealism and a recognition of the extensive divisions within the US working class. Given this, a class-conscious unionism must strive for a practice aimed at uniting the working class on solid grounds. The dominant practice of the CIO, mentioned earlier, represented an advance over the backwardness of the AFL with respect to organizing workers of colour. At the same time, the failure to challenge racist hiring and employment practices set the stage for recurring tensions. A class-conscious practice needs to challenge such divisions as part of their organizing and bargaining strategies. This is not a tactical prescription: each situation will have to be judged according to the conditions it presents. Nevertheless, an anti-racist practice must be developed which gives priority to striking down such divisions.

In order for such challenges to be successfully made, a tremendous educational effort must be conducted among the union members. This speaks to one of several debilitating problems in current US trade unionism: the neglect of worker education. Given the history of white supremacy in the USA, taking on a direct challenge to racist employment practices will simply not succeed unless a base of support for this has been built within the membership. Thus, when we speak about social justice unionism, we are starting with the centrality of the struggle against racist oppression as part of the strategic and tactical approach necessary in order to build working-class unity.

Second, there is the related question of what happened to the post-war ‘deal’. To the extent that white workers continue to hark back to the good old days, no trade unionism will be constructed which can successfully resist, let alone defeat, neoliberalism. The framework in which we need to operate must begin with the understanding that the dominant sectors of capital see no particular reason to accommodate the trade union movement, at least in the USA. Rather their intent is to eliminate or neutralize trade unionism as a force within the working class. This may happen with greater brutality, e.g., making use of current anti-terrorist measures in order to eliminate the Left and the more vibrant sectors of the trade union movement, or it may take place through mere continued corporate resistance and obstruction. There is little basis to believe that, at the present time, a significant section of capital is interested in reversing this direction. Even the more liberal elements in the Democratic Party display something approaching benign neglect of trade unionism.

Thus, social justice unionism must advance a program that challenges the state in new ways. The unions must take the lead, particularly in the absence of an independent political party, in building a progressive, alternative bloc which aims at power. Thinking in these terms means rethinking the relationship of organized labour to other progressive social movements, most especially the political movements of people of colour. Building such a bloc will necessitate moving the union movement in such a way that it confronts racist/national oppression outside of the workplace context as well as within it. This is a matter not simply of supporting progressive legislation, but also of offering concrete
material assistance to projects in communities that advance a working-class agenda. The objective of this is not charity, but building a base for power.

Third, in addition to being more class-conscious, social justice unionism must focus strategically on the southern and southwest parts of the USA. This is critical both because of the high concentrations of workers of colour in this region and because of the way US and global capital has shifted facilities into it. In order to alter the political balance in the USA, the southern and southwestern regions must be won by progressives. If successful in this, social justice unionism could act as a bridgehead for progressive politics.

Fourth, and despite the backlash that accompanied the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the union movement must uphold a new movement around immigrant rights. Some unions, for example the Service Employees International Union, Hotel and Restaurant Employees, the Union of Needle Trades, the Industrial and Technical Employees, and the United Food and Commercial Workers have focused attention on immigrants. This work must be expanded. The Los Angeles area, for example, is the largest site for manufacturing in the USA. The core workforces are Latino and Asian immigrant workers. Nevertheless, little attention has been devoted to organizing this area. Admittedly a daunting task, in most unions the political will to tackle it is absent. When, several years ago, some progressives initiated a project called the Los Angeles Manufacturing Action Project (LAMAP), unions that had expressed some cautious interest dropped the ball, and the AFL-CIO itself did not follow through for lack of affiliate support. Tackling LA manufacturing means not only organizing immigrant workers in their workplaces around workplace issues, but also organizing them as individuals in their communities around broader issues that affect their communities. This approach goes beyond the current notion of trade unionism. In tackling the immigrant question, special attention must be given to building bridges between Asian and Latino immigrants on the one hand, and African-Americans on the other. We have already mentioned the African-American Latino Alliance in North Carolina and the Labor Community Strategy Center/Bus Riders Union in Los Angeles. Also in Los Angeles similar not-for-profit organizations like the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates and the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights in Los Angeles has initiated an Asian/Latino/Black approach to organizing workers. These groups recognize that a multiracial multi-interethnic alliance is essential.

Another point about social justice unionism: a frame of reference must be fought for which acknowledges that there are working class organizations within communities of colour that need to be considered part of the labour movement. This is not a point limited to the tactics of organizing in immigrant communities. Rather it is a suggestion that a labour movement represents the sum total of organizations and activities within the working class that promote advancement, self-organization and power. Trade unions are one part of this larger tapestry.
HOW DO WE GET FROM HERE TO THERE?

There are three key questions that need to be addressed in this respect:
1. Who is the constituency of the labour movement?
2. Who are the friends, allies and enemies of the labour movement?
3. What is the geographic scope of our concern for the working class?

Today’s ‘traditionalist’, ‘pragmatic’ and ‘leftist’ ideological orientations in the American labour movement, although each one contains a range of views, have distinctive ways of answering these questions. This wide variety of ideological perspectives ranges from some that favour collusion with neoliberalism and global capitalism to others that call for the destruction of the capitalist system and imperialism. By no means are we suggesting that the movement could or should become ideologically monolithic. But, if ‘social justice unionism’ is to become more than an abstract concept, the role of the Left will be crucial – and it too will have to change.

Leftists have never been the dominant force in the US union movement. Sometimes they have had more influence, for example, during the era when the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies) were a significant force, and within the CIO up to the purge of the eleven ‘red’ unions in 1949. One could argue that they had an effect on the 1995 change of leadership in the AFL-CIO, but certainly not as obvious an impact as the previous two examples. For nearly two decades after the social ‘deal’ was broken by US corporations in the early 1970s, pragmatic and traditional unionists tried to breathe life into the already dead accord. Only when union density radically dropped, when unions were forced to engage in wide scale concession bargaining, and when US industry engaged in dramatic and rapid restructuring, did pragmatists begin to look for a change in leadership within the union movement. In a less obvious, but not insignificant way, leftists also influenced the change in the union movement from business-as-usual, service unionism, to an emphasis on organizing to increase union density. The Left included some people who had remained in the union movement even after the 1949 purges, but they were now joined by many younger, college-educated leftists who entered the union movement during the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these new union leaders were influenced by the anti-war and civil rights movements, solidarity movements in Latin America and, more generally, by Marxism.

The social forces that have affected the nature of work in the last quarter century may be forcing the union movement to face the need for another dramatic restructuring. If such a restructuring is to occur, the three sometimes conflicting ideological strands in the history of the US labour movement must be tied together to lay the foundation for rebuilding the movement by lifting the standard of living for all workers in the USA, linking different sectors of the labour movement (AFL-CIO unions, independent labour organizations and community forces) around common economic and political demands, and building international institutions that can create coordinated worker solidarity movements internationally. As some of our above examples indicate, these
strands must be tied together in four primary arenas: schools, legislatures, working-class communities, and work places.

Above all, from a left perspective, the future of the union movement lies in the ability of local unions to transform themselves. Not only are 70 per cent of the union movement’s resources tied up in local unions, but also it is at the local union level that workers and communities interact every day with the union movement. The shift from business unionism to social justice unionism requires a dramatic cultural as well as structural shift in the movement. The dominant culture of the US union movement today remains the one largely framed during the McCarthy era, with the fear of leftist infiltration still very strong. The distance between unions and community groups is also an obstacle to moving beyond the unions’ own white chauvinism and organizing minority and immigrant workers, as well as to the community unionism that is being advocated by the national AFL-CIO in its ‘Union Cities’ program. Social justice unionism, as we have described it here, means narrowing this gap and thus improving the fighting and winning ability of the US labour movement and the working class as a whole.

The internal constraints that exist in the US union movement which make such a dramatic change difficult point directly to the challenges that must be met. The greatest constraint is the inability to overcome the effects of racial oppression on unions’ own behaviour and structures. Social justice unionism will require more than inclusive unionism in the sense of finally recruiting individuals of all races. It must go beyond this to ally and actively collaborate with – become an organic part of – the community organizations fighting against the oppression inherent in America’s racially structured capitalism.

At the same time it will require a very different orientation to the American state and its place in the world. Anti-immigrant views and practices, for instance, are common across the racial divide in the American working class. Rarely is there a discussion about why immigrants, particularly from the global South, come to the USA (or for that matter, to the global North generally). The US trade union movement has done a great disservice in not taking up this question, and it will remain unable to do so unless it is prepared to tackle the implications of US foreign policy and the implications of empire. We are not dealing with everyone wanting to come to the US to live out their dreams, but rather we are living with the implications of colonialism and imperialism and the destruction of economies and ecologies. As a British immigrant rights group says: ‘We are here because you were there’.

The reconstruction of class and class-consciousness in the USA cannot be accomplished without addressing the reality of racial capitalism. Class-consciousness, let alone class unity, will not be built by simply understanding that there are masses of people who have similar relations to the means of production, distribution and exchange and thus have a common basis for unity. Unless the racial trip-wire is defused, if not destroyed, the closest we may ever come to working-class consciousness is the kind of tactical unity on economic issues that will fail to counter the appeal of right-wing populism within a significant segment of white workers.
NOTES

1. The story was related by Professor Michael Merrill to one of the authors (Bill Fletcher, Jr.) in the early 1990s. Professor Merrill was then attached to Rutgers University in New Jersey.

2. Lou Kushnick offered the following insight: ‘Furthermore, acceptance and opportunity are of crucial importance in the construction of “whiteness.” Although the Irish suffered discrimination at the hands of the “white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant” (WASP) elites, they had the basis of gaining acceptance in US society as whites rather than as Catholic Celts’. (Lou Kushnick, *Race, Class & Struggle*, London / New York: Rivers Oram Press, 1998, p. 207).

3. This approach to the understanding of ‘race’ in the USA has its roots among many theorists, including, but not limited to W.E.B. Dubois, Theodore Allen, Anne Braden, Lerone Bennett, Jr., David Roediger and Michael Omi and Howard Winant. While there are significant differences among them, they share an understanding of ‘race’ as a socio-political construct and as a central factor in comprehending the history and politics of the USA.


5. In Dubois’s classic *Black Reconstruction in America*, there is a description of some of these debates that took place within what was then understood to be organized labor.


9. For the role of Black workers in the formation of the CIO, Foner is the premier work. We would also refer the reader to the pictorial booklet: Bill Fletcher, Jr. and Peter Agard, *The Indispensable Ally: Black Workers and the Formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, 1934-1941*, Boston: William Monroe Trotter Institute, 1987.


13 Given the onset of the recession in 2001, it is not clear what will ultimately happen to these wage levels.
15 Collins and Yeskel, Economic Apartheid in America, pp. 15-19.
22 Heintz, Folbre, et. al., The Ultimate Field Guide to the U.S. Economy, p.77.
23 Ibid., p. 75.
24 Opinion polls regularly demonstrate a differential in the way in which whites and African-Americans, for instance, see the reality of racial discrimination. One of the most interesting tangents in this whole debate revolves around the case of O.J. Simpson. Simpson’s case (where he was charged with murdering his ex-wife and a friend of hers) became a racial time bomb in the USA. In recent opinion polls whites continue to be inflamed by this not guilty verdict. This case, more than any in recent times, speaks to the very different experiences blacks and whites have with the police.

27 See the demographic summary in Heintz, Folbre, et. al., The Ultimate Field Guide to the U.S. Economy, p. 69.


29 United Electrical Workers 150 and the North Carolina Latino Workers Alliance are also part of the alliance.

30 Information based on an interview with Ajamu Dillahunt, President of Local 1078 of the American Postal Workers Union, and a steering committee member of the Black Workers for Justice.

31 The Interstate 85 Corridor, for example, which goes through North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia has become a major site for foreign investment. Major manufacturing facilities have relocated to this area in search of cheap labor.