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USA Black Lives Matter

# Fighting for Black Lives at School

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**Ashley Smith interviewed Black Lives Matter activist and educator Jesse Hagopian about the struggle for Black Lives at school, the uprising for racial justice, the role of unions in that struggle, and the looming workers' fight against austerity in cities and states across the country.**

**Jesse Hagopian is a teacher at Garfield High School in Seattle, Washington and is co-editor with Denisha Jones of Black Lives Matter at School, forthcoming in December from Haymarket.**

**Schools throughout the country are caught between reopening amidst the pandemic and going remote to protect public health. How did your union approach this struggle, and what lessons does it have for teachers' unions across the country?**

This is an incredibly challenging situation for teachers and the education system because we know how important in-person learning is. There's no substitute for that online. Everything that is powerful about education, everything that is meaningful about education, is about collaborating towards solving problems, and that kind of collaboration can't really occur virtually.

Students make amazing connections and insights and breakthroughs when they're working together on solving a problem, whether that's a math problem or it's the problem of institutional racism. Seeing how they work together to solve these problems is really the magic of education. That is all out the window with online learning.

That's why social justice educators and union activists have opposed the corporate education reformers pressure to move toward virtual schooling. It took a pandemic to convince me that we needed to accept online learning because it just wasn't safe to return to the classroom.

So, our union started pushing for online learning this fall. We had to fight all the politicians that wanted us to return to the classroom to provide childcare for workers. The politicians and capitalists wanted that so that workers could return to work and get profits flowing again.

The radical leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) really set the precedent for all teachers' unions to follow. They used the threat of a strike to stop unsafe school openings that were looming in their cities. Once they did that, rank and file activists and members of Social Equity Educators (SEA) pushed our union to agitate for our school district to go remote.

Just like everywhere else, it was an initiative from below that scored a victory for public health in Seattle. It wasn't what the city bosses and the corporations; they wanted to get back to business as usual, no matter the health risks.

**I recently did an interview with Dave Zirin about the NBA players' strike for racial justice. He noted that labor has been largely missing in the fight against Trump and racism. Teachers' unions have been the exception, especially the CTU in Chicago and UTLA in LA. Those unions in particular have put fighting racism and anti-immigrant bigotry at the center of their contract fights and strikes. What's the significance of their struggles as a model for the rest of the labor movement? How have you and others in SEA pushed for the same?**

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Let me just start with the NBA players' strike. It was breathtaking and inspirational. It put the question of Black workers and workers in general using our power to strike to advance the struggle for Black lives. That for me is a pivotal advance for the movement.

We have been in this struggle for years. We've had some breakthroughs, especially in raising the consciousness about racism. More than ever before, people embrace the slogan of Black Lives Matter. But at the same time, the police keep murdering Black people and we are still far away from achieving our biggest demands like defunding, disbanding, and abolishing the police.

To win those, we're going to have to move beyond holding panels and staging street protests. Those are important, but they don't have the same power as shutting down businesses with strikes. If we can begin to do that then we can really put the bosses, who rely on the police to protect their ownership of the businesses and control of institutions, on the defensive. Once we threaten their profits, we are in a better position to win the systemic changes we desperately need.

The NBA players showed the movement how we can begin to move from protests to strikes. And once they went on strike, it spurred job actions throughout the sports industry. The WNBA was the most radical in their job actions. In fact, those women have been leading the way even before Kaepernick. And it spread into sports where Black athletes are a minority of the players like baseball and even hockey.

I am particularly proud of my Seattle Mariners. They refused to play a game in order to support Black lives. That was the proudest I've been in my long history as a Mariners fan, suffering through their hard times and celebrating their high points. When they went on strike for Black lives, when these players that I love embraced my humanity, it was an indescribable feeling of pride and joy.

I have a book that I co-edited coming out soon from Rethinking Schools called Teachers Unions and Social Justice: Organizing for the Schools and Communities Our Students Deserve. In the book we have lessons from the CTU and UTLA, who have set an example of how unions can lead in the struggle for racial justice. They've put social justice demands, especially against racism and anti-immigrant policies, at the heart of their contract campaigns and strikes and they've scored major victories.

I had the honor to join the UTLA strike and speak at one of their rallies. It was incredible to look out over a sea of over 60,000 people wearing red in the streets, demanding not just the higher wages that they deserve, but also a nurse in every school building, a multimillion dollar fund for legal services for their undocumented students, and an end to random searches of students by police in the schools. And they won all of those demands for teachers and their students.

That's the kind of social justice unionism that we need right now. It's the model that came out of South African struggle against Apartheid. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) shut down the mining industry in solidarity with the students who were protesting against Apartheid. Once the labor movement used its power to strike, the movement was able to overthrow one of the worst racist and oppressive regimes in the world.

If we can get the unions to adopt social justice unionism and place fighting racism at the center of their organizing, we can build a base of power that can win not just better wages and benefits, but also end police brutality and institutional racism. If they could do it in South Africa, we can do it here.

How have you and your fellow rank and file union members tried to implement social justice unionism in Seattle?

A big part of what we've done to advance that struggle is building the Black Lives Matter at School movement. It grew

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out of earlier efforts in fighting for racial justice in our union that culminated in our 2015 strike. During that strike, we pushed the union to demand race and equity teams in every school. These work to end the disproportionate suspension rates of black students and fighting around other racial justice issues.

When we foregrounded that demand during the strike, we were able to get people in the movement for Black lives to support our strike because they saw it was about racial justice. That was an important precursor to the BLM at School movement that I want to tell you more about. Denisha Jones and I have co-edited a book for Haymarket called *Black Lives Matter at School* that tells the full story of the movement with essays, poems, and union resolutions by educators and parents and students all over the country.

The movement started in Seattle in 2016, when John Muir Elementary School wanted to have a celebration of their Black students at the beginning of the school year in September. Teachers worked with Black Men United to Change the Narrative and the PTA to organize a day when all the teachers would wear a Black Lives Matter t-shirt designed by the school's art teacher.

Then a "blue lives matter" website and Breitbart found out about it and started bombarding the school with racist letters and emails. One particularly hateful person made a bomb threat against the school. Faced with this onslaught, the school district officially canceled the event and brought in bomb sniffing dogs to the school.

All of this heartbreaking. But to the credit of the educators, they continued with their plans anyway. Some parents and community members did show up, but the hate campaign and official cancellation made it smaller than it would have been.

We knew we had to take action. So, my friend Professor Wayne Au, whose son had gone to the school, connected me with the teachers there, and I brought them to a meeting of Social Equity Educators.

We came up with a plan to get a resolution passed in our union saying we stood in solidarity with John Muir Elementary. We realized that we needed to do more than pass a resolution. So, we set October 19th to be Black Lives Matter at School Day. We called on every teacher to go to school with a Black Lives Matter t-shirt on.

The resolution passed. But then we realized that if just a few radical teachers wore the shirt, it wouldn't look good. So, we got organized: we partnered with the NAACP and Black Student Unions; we got the endorsement from the Seattle PTA; we held press conferences to publicize the 19th; and we started a t-shirt ordering operation.

And it worked! Orders for the shirts started coming in first by the dozens and then by the hundreds. On October 19th, 2016 we had over 3000 out of the 5000 educators in Seattle come to school wearing the shirts.

And more importantly, many teachers taught classes that day about institutional racism and Black struggles throughout history. So, this was just an absolute eruption of solidarity and struggle.

The day of action culminated in an amazing evening event in a big hall. It was standing room and all the way out the door. Local and national news media came and covered it. That's where I former NFL football player and Seattle Seahawk, Michael Bennett, who I've worked with on many campaigns since. We had incredible youth performances, poems, and speeches.

Educators in Philadelphia's caucus of Working Educators saw those news clips about our action and they took the organizing to the next level. They expanded it from a day of action to a week of action, and they took the thirteen

principles of the Black Lives Matter Global Network and broke them down into teaching points for each day of the week.

After that they organized a conference called “Free Minds, Free People: A Radical Educator Conference.” There Philly educators gave a presentation about their week of action and got people from all over the country interested in the idea. We organized conference calls to organize for a national week in 2017 all across the country.

For that first national week, we organized around three demands and later added a fourth. These emphasize not only changing pedagogy in the classroom, but also making changes to undo institutional racism. Our first demand is to end zero-tolerance discipline policies and replace them with restorative justice. Our second is to hire more Black teachers. Our third is to teach Black history and ethnic studies.

The fourth demand we added is to fund counselors, not cops. When we added that one, it upset a lot of people. We were directly challenging police when the Black Lives Matter movement was in an ebb. But now, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, and too many others to name, we have all been a part of a massive rebellion that dramatically raised consciousness and won important victories across the country.

The police have been expelled from Minneapolis public schools, Saint Paul public schools, Oakland public schools, Denver public schools, and I’m proud to say, Seattle public schools—and many other districts around the country. We’re now in a changed environment for anti-racist educators in which we can make some huge gains for our Black students. What was once nearly off the table, like our fourth demand, is now becoming common sense.

**Tell us about your work with the Howard Zinn Education Project. You’re launching a new campaign around your book to educate teachers and students about the Black freedom struggle. What are you planning?**

It’s called Teach the Black Freedom Struggle Campaign. It focuses on transforming pedagogy in classrooms around the country. I think that in learning the true history of our past and the importance of the Black freedom struggle, a lot of educators’ own consciousnesses will be transformed.

There are several components of this campaign. We’re launching study groups across the country for educators to read our book *Teaching for Black Lives* and meet with its editors. The goal is to help educators learn how to teach for Black lives, centering Black students and Black history in their classrooms.

We’re organizing a series of webinars as part of the project. Educators and students will be able to come join us on Zoom and discuss different aspects of the Black struggle. We’ll also launch a podcast. We’ll interview historians about every era of the struggle and discuss how educators can integrate that history into their lesson plans.

**You’re launching this in an electric moment of the Black liberation struggle. What impact do you think that’s going to have?**

Oh, man, I’m excited about this. This is the largest rebellion in my lifetime—and one of the largest in history. It’s incredible to see my life’s work of trying to advance struggles for racial justice finally gain a broad hearing. We are now part of a rebellion that evokes stories my dad told me about from Black Power movement.

I’m hoping this campaign can be a significant contribution to raising the consciousness of union educators around the country to learn how we’ve won victories for racial justice in the past. The key lesson from that history is that every

one of those was won through mass collective struggle.

Take the Civil War, for example. The narrative which often gets told is that Lincoln freed the slaves. It's the story of the heroic individual that dominates corporate textbooks. But that leaves out the key factor of Black self-activity in our liberation from bondage.

Black enslaved people staged perhaps the largest general strike in U.S. history on plantations throughout the South. They struck, joined the union army, and fought for their own emancipation. That was decisive to the North's victory.

The same lesson is true throughout the rest of US history. During Reconstruction, masses of Black people organized in the Freedmen's Bureau and even interracial coalitions of white and Black people started public schools across the South.

During the Civil Rights Movement, again it was collective mass struggle from below that won change. It was the freedom rides, sit-ins, protests, and mass marches that were critical to toppling Jim Crow.

The more teachers examine the lessons from history and teach them, the more they'll be open to resolutions in their unions about taking collective action to challenge police violence, institutional racist policies like zero-tolerance discipline, and attacks on school budgets. So, I hope that this campaign contributes to the Black Lives Matter at Schools movement and the broader rebellion for Black Lives.

**One of the things that is so impressive about your work in all of this is how you combine racial justice demands with bread and butter demands, demands that are all too often counterposed. Why is this so important for the union movement to grasp?**

They just can't be counterposed. One of our demands in the Black Lives Matter at School movement is to hire more Black teachers. That in and of itself combines bread and butter and racial justice issues because it addresses a real crisis in the employment of Black educators. We've lost 26,000 Black teachers across the country since 2002. They've been pushed out of classrooms in city after city, mostly as a result of the corporate education reform policy of closing schools in Black neighborhoods, which typically have more Black teachers.

So, for Black workers, economic demands and racial justice demands are inseparable. But they're also inseparable for workers in general. Think about it: if unions win higher wages through contracts that fail to address discriminatory layoffs, those Black teachers who've been driven out of work won't get those higher wages. And the remaining, predominantly white teachers will be forced to work in consolidated schools with larger classes in worse conditions.

But look at it from another angle. Remember, the Black freedom struggle has always animated the union movement in era after era. White workers have benefited tremendously from the militancy of Black workers going on strike. That was certainly true in the 1960s and 1970s and I think the same will be true today.

This rebellion for Black lives I hope will finally show the labor movement what it takes to make change. It shows that elections, letter writing, petitions, and lobbying, while they are important and have their place, are far less effective in winning change than staging massive street protests and going on strike.

This uprising has won more victories for racial justice than decades of voting and lobbying. I hope the labor movement learns from the current Black freedom struggle that militancy and mass collective protest and strikes is the winning strategy for all workers.

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**You played an important part in one of the biggest victories of this uprising—kicking the police unions out of the Martin Luther King, Jr. County Labor Council, which represents all the unions in Seattle. Clearly this did not happen overnight. How was this victory won? How can union activists build on this to expel police unions from their unions, state federations, and the AFL-CIO?**

This victory is particularly gratifying for me because I've been making the argument to kick the cops out when few others were. I faced a lot of heat for saying police are not workers and they should be expelled from the labor movement.

A couple of years ago, I was invited to speak at a Washington State Labor Council forum about racial justice and unionism. After the other panelists and I gave our presentations, someone from the audience asked whether the police should be in our unions. When no one else on the panel responded, I stepped forward and answered the question.

I asked the audience to think about which side the police were on in their favorite struggles for social justice. Which side were the police on when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus? Which side were they on in the Stonewall Rebellion? The struggle for the eight hour working day? Or just about every single picket line?

In every case, the police were on the wrong side, often arresting and brutalizing protesters and unionists. So, I argued that they have no place in our movement. I took some heat for that for a long time. But, as King said, the arc of the universe is long and it bends toward justice.

Just recently I gave a very similar speech at a rally organized by the Democratic Socialists of America at the Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP) in Seattle. The CHOP had been set up by protesters who had taken over Capitol Hill and driven the police out of their precinct as a liberated space in the city.

I was wearing a hoodie with mugshots of leaders of the Black freedom struggle: Rosa Parks, Angela Davis, and Huey P. Newton. When I said, "My favorite leaders all have mugshots, let's kick the police out of the unions," I got enthusiastic applause.

So now those of us who have been arguing this for a long time are getting a hearing. Sensing the new opportunity, a few union militants and I put forward a resolution in our union to kick the cops out of our union and defund them.

One of the arguments we made was that the Seattle police shot and killed Charleena Lyles, a mother of four Seattle Public Schools children. If it had been someone from any other organization that had killed a parent of the children we work with, we would have kicked that organization out of our schools and our union immediately. Why should the police be any different? The house of labor should not tolerate racist killer cops in our midst.

Especially when they assault our own union members! Many educators here in Seattle, including myself, have been brutalized by the cops. I was assaulted in 2015 after giving the final speech at the Martin Luther King Day rally. I was on the phone trying to coordinate getting a ride to my two year-old son's birthday party, and for no reason at all, a cop pepper-sprayed me in the face.

So, after years of organizing, making arguments, and building the movement, we had laid the groundwork to win an overwhelming vote in my union to expel the police from the King County Labor Council. That then came to a vote in the Labor Council.

We were all on Zoom watching the meeting. There were presentations and arguments and then the vote came in favor of expelling the police union. It was just an incredible victory.

**How can we build upon that victory? This is a big argument in unions and the national AFL-CIO. How can we get the cops out of our unions across the country?**

This goes back the question of what relationship the union movement has with the rebellion for Black lives. The labor movement still has no national plan or strategy for how to join the movement or even fight for their own existence. I don't think we can look to the existing union leadership to provide answers or a way forward.

It's going to have to come from rank and file activists in unions across the country. They can start by pointing to the victory here in King County for inspiration, ideas, and strategies for expelling the police from their unions.

Of course, this is a long struggle and you can't snap your fingers and win. We had laid the foundations over years. But the one advantage we have now is the mass uprising; the wind is in our sails to score victories, but that will take hard, patient work to get cops out of our unions across the country.

**We are headed for a new epoch of austerity regardless of the outcome of the elections. The federal, state, and local governments will be facing an enormous crisis of debts and deficits. They will likely turn to austerity measures against social spending, and in particular, against education. How should teachers' unions and the union movement more broadly prepare to fight against coming austerity attacks?**

We've seen this movie before. In 2008 when the great recession hit, tax revenues collapsed across the country, and so did spending on public education—and in fact, many states still haven't returned to pre-2008 recession spending levels on education. There were teachers laid off throughout the country, including myself. I was laid off for a year.

I hope that we've learned something from that experience so that we can fight the coming austerity measure with better strategies and tactics. The first thing we have to grasp is that there is no shortage of money in the system. It's a question of where that money is spent. Right now, the rich are hoarding money while workers and the poor are suffering through unbearable conditions.

Look at Seattle. The contrast between conditions for us and for capitalists could not be starker. Our Pier 58 recently collapsed injuring a couple of people. The West Seattle Bridge just cracked and is now shut down. So, everyone who lives on the whole Westside of Seattle is isolated and has to drive hours out of their way to get into the city. We're seeing our basic infrastructure crumble, schools go underfunded, our Black and Brown neighborhoods getting gentrified, joblessness run rife throughout the working class, and conditions for people of color grow dramatically worse.

At the same time, this city is saturated with wealth. We have the two richest people on earth: Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos. Bezos is the first person to have \$200 billion, and he's projected to become the first trillionaire by 2026. The only precedent for such inequality in US history is the robber baron era back at the start of the twentieth century.

These conditions will trigger an upsurge of class struggle in Seattle and throughout the country. The question is what kind of ideas, strategies, and tactics we will use when we go into this struggle. Will we make the mistake of waiting for the next election in the hopes of getting a union-friendly politician in office to solve our problems in some nebulous future?

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Or are will we going to strike for economic and racial justice right now and take back the money that's ours to spend on what we need? Will we march and strike for a wealth tax? Or are we going to allow Microsoft, Amazon, Boeing, and Starbucks to continue leeching off working people in this state?

The labor movement is going to have to get its house in order and get ready to fight. It's time to return to the strategies that we saw in the labor movement in the 1930s, when there were mass strikes that shut down whole cities.

There's real potential for those kinds of strikes today. The question is whether union militants can organize the rank and file to push our unions to become organizations for class struggle and social justice and not just for managing the exploitation of workers.

*25 September 2020*

Source [Spectre](#).

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