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USA

The Freedom Struggle Is a Labor Struggle, Then & Now

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AS WE THINK, again, about the role of organized labor in the long Black freedom struggle, it is worth noting that in India at this very moment 250 million farmers, workers, students and allies have joined in what had been a three-month long protest against the Modi government's neoliberal agricultural policies.

The new parliamentary bills essentially eliminate state-run regulated agricultural markets, and allow direct transactions between farmers and private corporate interests — namely international commodity traders and conglomerates such as Walmart and Cargill.

The new arrangements will destroy small farmers and force those who survive to enter into contracts with corporate global seed and agrochemical suppliers, traders, distributors and retail concerns. The legislation encourages the unregulated storage of produce and commodity speculation, overturning laws that made hoarding food items for profit a criminal offense.

Imagine a quarter of a billion people trying to stop unfettered capitalism, save the planet, and resist massive dispossession and a catastrophic migration to already overburdened cities — an example of militant solidarity in the face of a global pandemic and a global recession. The largest general strike in human history, and hardly anyone is talking about it in this country.

And yet events in India might afford us the most important lessons for the hour: the strike invites us to confront the question, who makes up the working class and where is it located?

When we talk about labor history on a global scale, I'm always surprised by how quickly we slip into a Euro/U.S.-centric framework, and how we unwittingly privilege urban over rural.

I'm always reminding my own students that the largest workers' revolts of the 19th and 20th centuries occurred neither in Europe nor the United States, but in the colonies and nations of the Global South.

Black Workers and “Racial Capitalism”

When I'm asked about the role of organized labor in the Black freedom movement, I'm always quick to point out that Black workers have been at the forefront of the labor movement, especially in the 19th century, when labor organizing took the form of parties and mass organizations rather than guilds and skilled trades unions — Knights of Labor and the Greenback Labor Party, for example.

Black workers provided leadership to white workers — or at least they tried. The more familiar story, of course, emphasizes how capitalists deploy racism as a weapon to divide workers and crush opposition; use the coercive arm of the state to put down strikes or contract out convict labor; bribe conservative Black leaders to oppose unions and break strikes; foment mob violence in the name of protecting white womanhood and fighting communism.

But wily capitalists alone are not solely to blame for undermining labor's collective power. Trade unions were also exclusionary, not inclusive. They were based on skilled trades and protecting those jobs. There were exceptions, like

the IWW and the CIO, but the key takeaway here is that when white workers attempt to go it alone by building exclusionary racist unions, they lose. We can look at the 1866 campaign for an eight-hour day: in St. Louis, unionists built a biracial campaign and won; in New Orleans a lily-white campaign went down in defeat.

This brings me to the crux of the matter — the real question is not “labor’s” support of “Black liberation” but rather: why has so much of the U.S. labor movement refused to embrace the entire class? Just consider the long history of excluding Black workers, Asian workers, agricultural and domestic workers. Why have so many unions historically consistently supported or tolerated a racially segmented labor force and wage differentials based on race?

What explains white working-class support for housing policies that not only maintain segregation but devalue homes in Black and mixed neighborhoods and boost home values in segregated white neighborhoods? Or policies that have excluded Black people from publicly funded institutions — better schools, better hospitals and healthcare?

Are these “labor” issues? Of course they are! Spatial segregation explains so much that a workplace focus cannot — hidden costs of living, food deserts, limits on mobility to access decent jobs, home/property values and impact on intergenerational wealth, school funding, and services like access to sanitation, fire fighters, and libraries. (Imagine what it means for Black and Brown kids to attend school on-line by using the internet at their neighborhood McDonalds.)

This is what we mean by “racial capitalism,” which not only produces deep race, class and gender inequalities but continues to keep a segment of white-working class in a state of precarity while convincing them that Black and Brown people are to blame.

The hidden secret of racial capitalism’s longevity is the capacity of capital and the state to capture the “white” workers and tie its identity to race (whiteness) and masculinity. We all need liberating from racial capitalism.

An Ideological Struggle

I am not suggesting that labor unions are hopelessly racist, nor is Michael Goldfield in his extraordinary book *The Southern Key*. On the contrary, we have many examples of unions dedicated to social justice and antiracism. I’m reluctant to call these “exceptions” since it implies that the “labor movement” is singular and unitary rather than combined and uneven.

Put simply, a union’s political orientation cannot be reduced solely to the inherent contradictions between labor and capital but must be understood within a broader ideological struggle. The extraction of surplus value alone does not explain why some sectors of the labor movement embrace a vision of racial and gender justice and equality, others hold fast to racism, patriarchy and social order, and perhaps most reflect a messy, ever-shifting combination of these tendencies.

And as I’ve suggested, some of the most critical battles have occurred not at the workplace but at the level of the state — struggles over social policy, state violence, budgetary and fiscal decisions, housing and welfare, education, etc.

Indeed, as we revisit the 1930s, the era we hold up as the heyday of interracial working-class radicalism, there are three things we ought to consider. The Left, and here I mean specifically the Communist Party, was different from other socialist parties up to that point in that it centered anti-racism.

Whatever the CP's many faults and missteps, it generally resisted color-blindness, underscoring distinctive features of Black, Brown and Indigenous workers' struggles, while refusing to forgive or explain away the racism of white workers. Second, the CP's biggest mobilizations did not center on relief or jobs or trade union struggles but the defense of the "Scottsboro Boys," nine young Black men falsely accused of raping two white women on a train in Alabama.

Third, the 1930s, the period we often describe as the U.S. left turn, was also characterized by rising fascism that drew a segment of the white working class into groups such as the Black Shirts, the Klan, the White Legion, and the American Nazi Party.

In other words, what often animates social justice or civil rights unionism are movements with a vision of justice, movements that are anti-fascist, anti-racist, and dare I say anti-capitalist (though embracing the latter doesn't necessarily translate into embracing the former).

Where Organizing Succeeded

In the South, Black labor militants, many of whom were Communists, were the key to building the CIO in the region, even during the early stages of Cold War-era attacks on labor and the Left. Operation Dixie, the postwar campaign to organize the South, is usually seen as a total failure, but as Will Jones demonstrates, it succeeded where Black workers were in leadership positions — e.g. among Black lumber workers in North Carolina and Black tobacco and cotton-press workers in North Carolina, Arkansas, and western Tennessee.

Black workers built and sustained the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) campaign to organize sawmill employees in the South, in spite of unremitting violence from employers, allied businessmen and white workers, and the CIO's best efforts to push race off to the side.

In Elizabethtown, North Carolina where in 1948 the IWA waged a militant strike against one of the largest lumber companies in the Southeast, it was precisely racial solidarity and Black community support that ensured their success. [\[1\]](#)

The largely Communist-led Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers of America (FTA) rested on the union's ability to tap into a deep well of black community organizing and grievances centered around workplace conditions, wages, and racial discrimination. By 1947, FTA won 111 union elections, bringing some 15,000 workers into the union.

Winston-Salem, North Carolina, had become the epicenter of FTA strength in the region. Led by an extraordinary group of Black women, notably Moranda Smith, Velma Hopkins, Theodosia Simpkins, and Viola Brown, Local 22 had successfully organized workers at R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company.

They fought for more than higher wages and better conditions; they promoted a Black radical vision that civil and human rights were inseparable from labor rights.

They protested segregation, fought sexual harassment at work, revitalized the local chapter of the NAACP, launched voter registration campaigns, set up worker education classes, and established a library stocked with volumes on African American history and political economy, and were largely responsible in 1947 for electing Winston-Salem's first Black alderman, the Reverend Kenneth Williams. [\[2\]](#)

Collective Power Under Attack

The success of the left-led unions such as FTA, the International Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, the Farm Equipment Workers, United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) among others, were strengthened by the 1945-46 strike wave, only to be bludgeoned by the state and corporate response to the postwar labor insurgency.

The collective power of labor, especially in cases of exemplary interracial cooperation, threatened to severely curtail corporate power, or worse for capital, usher in a new political order that would further regulate business, expand the welfare state, protect workers' rights, and undermine corporate profits.

We all know what happened next: the war on labor ramped up in the name of fighting communism. Left-oriented labor militants were fired or deported or brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).

The Taft-Hartley Act (1947) restricted workers' right to strike; outlawed closed shops, secondary boycotts and "sympathy" strikes; imposed hefty fines on union officials who failed to oppose unauthorized strikes; prevented unions from contributing to political campaigns; and required union officers to sign loyalty oaths and affidavits affirming they are not Communists.

Those that refused to sign were the left-led unions — the unions that proved to be the most antiracist — for which they were summarily expelled from the CIO between 1949 and 1950.

The story doesn't end here, however. There is a prevailing myth still in circulation that Cold War repression forced the Civil Rights Movement to abandon labor and economic justice in favor of desegregating public accommodations and other middle-class demands.

The 1963 March on Washington, in fact, was about two things: ending racist violence and securing "jobs and freedom." The lead organizers, Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph, both had roots in socialist and labor movements.

Randolph's opening remarks laid out a clear agenda for labor. Echoing Karl Marx's oft-quoted line in *Capital*, that "Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded," he warned

"[T]his civil rights revolution is not confined to the Negro, nor is it confined to civil rights for our white allies know that they cannot be free while we are not. . . .

"[W]e have no future in a society in which 6 million black and white people are unemployed and millions more live in poverty. Nor is the goal of our civil rights revolution merely the passage of civil rights legislation. Yes, we want all public accommodations open to all citizens, but those accommodations will mean little to those who cannot afford to use them.

"Yes, we want a Fair Employment Practice Act, but what good will it do if profit-gearred automation destroys the jobs of millions of workers black and white?" [\[3\]](#)

The Negro American Labor Council (NALC) was a lead sponsor of the March. It had organized local marches under the slogan, "Freedom from Poverty through Full Employment," and threatened to hold a national one-day work

stoppage to pressure Congress to pass the Civil Rights bill.

NALC also fought to raise the federal minimum wage and extend its coverage to all workers, and backed efforts to organize domestic workers, abolish the House Un-American Activities Committee, and build up the American Labor Party as a third-party alternative.

So what happened to this vision of economic justice? First, the big groups — the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Congress on Racial Equality, the NAACP and the Urban League — threw their energies almost entirely behind passing the watered-down Civil Rights bill, supporting a Voting Rights bill, and trying to influence the Democratic Party.

Second, the labor movement betrayed the coalition's racial justice agenda. AFL-CIO leader George Meany and the United Auto Workers' Walter Reuther made lofty statements and financial contributions in support of Civil Rights, while acceding to its rank-and-file white members who worried that the elimination of racial barriers to equal wages, access to skilled jobs, and unfettered access to housing, would threaten their privileged status.

Third, Randolph and other leaders excluded Black women's organizations from playing any significant role in the movement. This weakened the coalition, in part because activists such as Pauli Murray, Anna Hedgeman, Dorothy L. Robinson, Rosa Parks, Gloria Richardson, and Dorothy Height had already committed to linking labor and economic justice to questions of racial and gender equity [\[4\]](#)

A Radical Revival for Justice

The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party never abandoned economic justice. They not only embraced a program of economic justice but went further, calling for the redistribution of wealth, reparations, and workers' power.

When SNCC organized its Freedom Vote campaign in Mississippi in the summer and fall of 1963, they ran a slate of candidates in a "mock" election to challenge the state's white Democratic party behind a fairly radical platform that included the right of labor to organize and engage in collective bargaining; a \$1.25 minimum wage; support for farm cooperatives in place of sharecropping and dispossession; provision of low-interest loans for small farmers; a progressive land tax on tracts of land over 500 acres and tax exemption for those with plots smaller than 500 acres.

SNCC had also founded the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union (MFLU) to organize agricultural workers in the Delta. In the spring of 1965, about 350 members of the union went on strike to demand \$1.25 an hour for chopping cotton (clearing weeds). The planters would not budge and instead evicted the workers, leaving them to starve.

In January 1966 when the Greenville Air Force base was about to be sold, strikers occupied it to draw federal attention to their plight. After Air Force police expelled them, they regrouped in an encampment dubbed "Strike City" and appealed to liberal organizations and the government for food, clothing, and other basic commodities. [\[5\]](#)

Unfortunately, without economic leverage to force planters to meet their demands, and lacking federal support, the MFLU was defeated. But that defeat profoundly shaped the politics of the MFDP, which pursued a radical economic vision even when middle-class Black Mississippians were finally admitted into the mainstream Democratic party.

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By 1968, the MFDP backed a Guaranteed Annual Income, extended day care for poor and working mothers, comprehensive medical care for all, increased federal provisions for food stamp programs, free higher education, an end to the draft, and full military withdrawal from Vietnam. [6]

This revolutionary vision of social justice unionism found expression among Black auto workers in Detroit. In May of 1968, veteran organizer General Baker led a wildcat strike of 4000 workers at the Dodge Main plant to protest a speedup of the assembly line. They did not win since most white workers did not support the strike, but out of that action the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) was born.

The strikes spread to the Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle Plant, giving rise to ELRUM, and other actions in other plants like the Ford Revolutionary Union Movement (FRUM). DRUM's specific demands included workplace safety, lower production demands, and an end to racist hiring practices.

Of course the RUM leaders wanted to win better working conditions and wages for Black workers, but their ultimate goal was freedom for all workers — and that meant in their view the end of capitalism. So in 1969, leaders of all the RUMs came together and formed the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, with the long-term goal of becoming a political party or revolutionary movement.

The League fought the leadership of the UAW, who not only tried to crush the revolutionary union movement but called police to break up their meeting and relied on violence to undermine the League's campaign to elect Ron March, a member of DRUM, on the board of trustees of the UAW.

Even though March would have fought for all workers and resisted speedups, too many white workers were threatened by Black leadership.

League members knew that racism limited the ability of workers to unite, undermining the strength of the entire class. But they also argued that white workers benefited from racism in the form of higher wages, cleaner and safer jobs and greater union representation. [7]

There are many other examples. Greensboro, North Carolina, has been a center of interracial and anti-racist labor organizing. Last year we observed the 50th anniversary of the Greensboro Massacre, when armed Klansmen and Nazis assassinated five organizers in broad daylight — four of whom were members of the Workers Viewpoint Organization (later the Communist Workers Party). The event on November 3, 1979, is usually described as an anti-Klan rally but they were also there to organize textile workers.

Fast forward to 1996, Local 2603 of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE) prevailed in a three-year campaign against K-Mart in Greensboro, thanks largely to the union's strong base in the African American community.

The union attacked racial discrimination head on, filing a complaint with the EEOC and enlisting key local Black community leaders to organize a boycott. The boycott forced K-Mart to raise wages and implement a grievance process that would shield workers from unjust discipline and terminations. The Greensboro City Council passed a resolution requiring that all future employers moving into the city pay a living wage of \$12.50 per hour before receiving any city tax incentives.

The boycott was organized by a coalition of Greensboro Black ministers called "The Pulpit Forum." Forum leaders engaged in mass civil disobedience campaigns resulting in the arrest of several ministers, including the Reverend

Nelson Johnson. Johnson, along with his wife Joyce, had organized the November 3rd rally where he suffered a serious knife wound in the conflagration.

The main point is that UNITE adopted a civil rights/community based union strategy by appealing to the whole Black community and its tradition of resistance to racism and injustice. Mobilizing the entire Black community was the key to their victory.

The Working Class As It Really Is

In closing, what the Indian general strike tells us is that we need to rethink the composition of the working-class. When we shift our attention from the big industrial unions where we imagine the working class resides to low wage, marginalized workers in fast food, retail, healthcare, homecare, domestic work, agriculture, etc. — workers who have to survive on involuntary part-time work, short-term contracts, zero-hours contracts, telemarketing (homeworkers and prison labor for example), and the concierge economy: Uber, Lyft, Grub Hub and so on — the horizon looks radically different.

Once powerful engines of racial and gender exclusion, often working with capital to impose glass ceilings and racially segmented wages, the 21st century labor movement has largely embraced principles of social justice, anti-racism, immigrant rights and cross-border strategies.

It seems that the new labor leaders are teachers, nurses and other healthcare workers, clerical workers, fast food workers and flight attendants, among others.

They have adopted new strategies, from passing minimum wage laws at the municipal and state levels to using Community Benefits Agreements to secure living-wage jobs, equitable working conditions, green building practices, affordable housing, as well as childcare provisions. And in alliance with movements such as the Movement for Black Lives, and immigrant rights activists, campaigns such as OUR Walmart, Fight for Fifteen, Change to Win, are leading the way, building the most dynamic labor movement we have seen in generations. [8]

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[1] William P. Jones, "Black Workers and the CIO's Turn Toward Racial Liberalism: Operation Dixie and the North Carolina Lumber Industry, 1946-1953," *Labor History* 41 no. 3 (2000), 279-306; see also Goldfield, *The Southern Key*.

[2] Robert Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

[3] Andrew E. Kersten, *A. Philip Randolph: A Life in the Vanguard* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 155-56.

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[4] See, for example, William P. Jones, *March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights* (New York: Norton, 2013); Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008); Robert Zeiger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America since 1865* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010); Alan Draper, *Conflict of Interest: Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History* 75 (December 1988), 786-811.

[5] SNCC Digital Gateway [February 1966 Occupation of Greenville Air Force Base](#).

[6] See [Program of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party 1968](#).

[7] James Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012, orig. 1975); Muhammad Ahmad (Maxwell Stanford), *We Will Return in the Whirlwind: Black Radical Organizations, 1960-1975* (Chicago: Charles Kerr, 2003), 237-283; and see film, "Finally Got the News," dir. And prod. Stewart Bird, Rene Lichtman and Peter Gessner (First Run Icarus Films, orig. 1970).

[8] See Sarah Jaffe, *Necessary Trouble: America's New Radicals* (New York: Nation Books, 2016); Bill Fletcher, Jr. and Fernando Gaspas, *Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path Toward Social Justice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009); Dorian T. Warren, "The American Labor Movement in the Age of Obama: The Challenges and Opportunities of a Racialized Political Economy," *Perspectives on Politics*, 8 no. 3 (September 2010), 847-860; Robin D. G. Kelley, "Building a Progressive Movement in 2012," *Souls* 14, nos. 1 and 2 (2012), 10-18; Premilla Nadasen, *Household Workers Unite!: The Untold Story of African-American Women Who Built a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016).