

Race to Labor: Can Organized Labor Be an Agent of Social & Economic Justice?

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Introduction: Colonial Beginnings

Race and the course of organized labor are inextricably bound and have been since workers made their first appearance on the shores of North America. And that is where our story must begin. The settlers who arrived on North American shores, beginning in 1607, immediately encountered two problems, in addition to basic matters of survival. The first: What to do about the people who were already occupying the land, i.e., the Native Americans or First Nations? The second: Who was going to do the work? Both questions were fundamental. Would the settlers recognize the existence of the indigenous population, or would they seek to remove them? And, how would the actual work of building a capitalist society in the colonies take place?

As Lerone Bennett, Jr. (1975) discusses in *The Shaping of Black America*, the workforce for colonial North America was largely kidnapped. The kidnapping took place in both Europe and Africa, and those kidnapped were mainly brought over as indentured servants. In the case of Africa, those kidnapped were brought over as both indentured servants *and* slaves.

Contrary to many of the myths with which we are familiar, life in colonial North America was difficult and tyrannical. The conditions of the indentured, or bond, servants were slave-like

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for the seven years and longer in which they were held bondage.² The conditions for actual slaves were abysmal, and, unlike their indentured counterparts, their terms of servitude were for life (and, by the end of the 1600s, for the life of one's children as well).

Despite the difference in their status, these captive workforces intermingled and occasionally united in risings—so-called “bond servant revolts”—against the colonial elite. The motivations for such revolts were varied. The famous Bacon's Rebellion of 1676, for instance, was sparked by a demand for land (which meant further invasions of territories occupied and controlled by Native Americans) but morphed into a revolt by both indentured servants and slaves that shook the colonial system.³

During the 1600s, in the face of challenges from Native Americans on the frontier and incipient united revolts by bondservants and slaves in the colonial workforce, the colonial elite imposed a system, the prototype of which had been developed during the English occupation of Ireland to divide and weaken the Irish people.⁴ It involved the construction of a social-political system of giving people different rights based on a non-scientific—yet very real—category called *race*.

In the context of North America, race involved the division of humanity into different categories, and it is here that the notion of being white came into existence. Anyone with a drop of African blood was black. Native Americans were red; however, in an example of perversity associated with so-called race, one drop of Native American blood did not make one a Native

² Indentured servants were typically contracted to work for seven years for their masters in return for passage to North America; masters often extended these terms beyond seven years as penalties for minor infractions, extracting as much labor as possible from their servants on whose labor, along with that of slaves, the survival of the colonies depended. See Morgan 1975, 216.

³ For more on the critical question of labor in the North American colonies, see Allen 1994. For an overview of Bacon's Rebellion specifically, see Allen 1994, Chapter 11, 203–22.

⁴ As Cedric Robinson explains, the English considered the Irish to be an inferior race, incapable of governing themselves. They used this rationale to justify the oppression of Ireland. Looked upon as inferior, the Irish were incorporated into British systems of production as a cheap labor force. This would serve as a prototype for later forms of oppression. See Robinson 2000, Part I, 9–70.

American.⁵ Europeans could become white—this meaning that certain European groups were identified as white and therefore superior, e.g., English, French, Germans, Nordic, while other Europeans existed in a racial twilight zone, in some cases for centuries, e.g., Irish.

The arbitrary and artificial division of people into different races was made real and concrete through various legal provisions designed to foster whites' contempt for Blacks and Indians and thereby prevent them from making common cause and coming together against the colonial elite. Blacks could be enslaved, and, over the course of the 1600s, slavery became a system for life and for the life of one's child (chattel slavery). Whites could be bondservants but not slaves.⁶ In 1680 Virginia passed a law prescribing thirty lashes to any "negroe or other slave" who lifted his hand against a Christian. As historian Edmund Morgan has explained, "This was a particularly effective provision in that it allowed servants to bully slaves without fear of retaliation, thus placing them psychologically on par with masters" (331). Another law in 1705 ordered the dismemberment of unruly slaves but specifically forbade masters from whipping white servants without an order from a justice of the peace (Morgan 1975, 352–60). Those defined as white could own guns and were enlisted to suppress the slaves they had once joined in revolt, in order to reinforce slavery, as well as to war against the Native Americans.⁷ Such laws, enacted throughout the colonies, helped to both create and reinforce racial divisions among workers.⁸

⁵ The reasoning for this rested in the realm of control of land. If there were more people who could claim Native American ancestry, they could claim land via treaty rights. The interest of the settler regime was to consistently narrow who could claim to have a natural right to the land due to being Indigenous.

⁶ The English legal tradition that colonists brought with them to North America in the 1600s held that one could not enslave one's fellow Christians. Peoples from Africa were looked upon as heathens, even if they were baptized or were originally Christian, thereby justifying their enslavement. See Goetz 2012, 13.

⁷ For a discussion of the historical question of who should be armed in colonial America and how this question was interwoven with race, see Morgan 1975, 352–360.

⁸ This is what makes the ongoing debate about gun ownership so complicated. Although it is frequently raised in the context of the Second Amendment, in reality the matter of gun ownership goes back to the 1600s and the development of white as equivalent to being free and owning a gun. We can see this today in the different

Thus, by the 1700s, the colonial masters of North America had created a system that could reinforce the domination of the elite. The so-called whites were taught to identify with the colonial elite and to join with them in maintaining the colonial order. Within this system, Native Americans faced expulsion, if not extermination, and Africans faced total domination.

Putting such a system into place, it should be noted, was not the result of indoctrination alone but also brutal force. As we have seen, laws and regulations were established to drive a wedge between these populations, and these laws were barbarically implemented, such as laws and practices against miscegenation. A 1691 law, for example, dictated that a white man or woman who married a Black, Mulatto, or Indian was to be banished from the colony. A white woman caught having illicit relations with a black man could be sold into indentured servitude for a period of five years. If she was already a servant, she could have seven years added to her term of servitude (Morgan 1975, 335).

Over time a *differential in treatment* was created among these populations, a differential that ferociously evolved from law and regulation to accepted practices. It is worth noting, for example, that white men were not punished for illicit relations with black women—relations that often amounted to rape. This is because the objective of the laws was to maintain a social distance between black and white: Because a child's status as slave or free followed the condition of its mother, a child born to a slave would also be a slave. But a black child born to a white woman could not be enslaved and would therefore reveal the arbitrary nature of the racial division among the working populations, slave and free. This was unacceptable to the colonial elite.

approaches that the larger society takes toward legal gun ownership by African Americans, Native Americans, and Chicanos/Mexicanos, compared with that of whites.

The ability of the laboring populations to rise up in favor of freedom and dignity, therefore, was undermined by the construction of a system of racial/racist oppression. Race suppressed Africans and Native Americans and, in effect, disempowered the so-called white laborer by preventing them from making common cause with those who shared their class interests. Power remained centered among those at the top where it has largely remained ever since.⁹

Race—other than the human race—is not a scientific category but is a social-political category, which represents, by its very existence, a differential in treatment. In other words, the assumption that skin color represents qualitative differences that make some peoples incompatible has built into it the notion of superiority and inferiority and, with that notion, the idea that the so-called superior population should *be treated differently than the so-called inferior population*. This difference or differential in treatment was constructed in such a way that it did not depend on the economic health of the capitalist society that was being created. It only depended on the constant reinforcement—via the operation of the State as well as the way the culture was organized—of a difference in treatment. Obviously, slavery for Africans and genocide against Native Americans were the most brutal of examples of this differential. But the differentials in treatment could range from the subtle, e.g., who is addressed formally and who is not, to the more blatant, e.g., who can travel or live in certain neighborhoods and who cannot.

The racial differential was not the only thing dividing working people. Populations were also divided along gender lines, i.e., patriarchy, inherited from older socio-economic systems but used very successfully under capitalism as a means of exploiting the labor of women, frequently

⁹ Historian David Roediger explains that, early in the colonial American period, the fact that indentured servitude existed among whites made it difficult to draw a hard and fast distinction between the statuses of black and white workers, as both were subject to varying degrees of ‘unfreedom.’ However, increasingly, with the republican agitation for freedom that culminated in the American Revolution, white workers began defining themselves against slaves as freemen. See Roediger 1999, 27, 36.

at no cost (Kessler-Harris 1982). Though these two systems of oppression—racism and patriarchy—have co-existed, they have played different roles in sustaining and advancing capitalism. They have frequently overlapped one another and neither can be viewed in isolation from the other. This paper, however, concentrates on the phenomenon of racism and its specific role in carrying out oppression as well as ensuring social control over the working population by the elite.

This system of oppression and social control was tied to the needs of the colonial capitalist society that was being constructed on the East Coast of North America in the 1600s and 1700s. To ensure the stability and relative passivity of the labor force, workers were divided to limit the potential for unified resistance or revolt; race emerged as the most powerful means by which to divide workers.

Should we be surprised by this racial system of oppression? Not in the least. First, the European colonization of the Americas, and later other parts of the world, relied heavily on the labor of enslaved Africans, leading to the emergence of a racialized division of labor, which marked Africans as slaves. As European nations expanded to the far-flung regions of the world, they brought with them the notions of race and racial superiority that justified the oppression of other peoples (See Robinson 2000, Part I). While it is true that, historically, most civilizations have practiced some form of slavery, the system of chattel slavery that robbed individuals of their humanity and stripped them of their rights emerged only with the development of capitalism.¹⁰ Whereas previous to the arrival of capitalism, peoples most commonly were

¹⁰ In prior societies that permitted slavery, for instance, there tended to be certain rights for slaves. There were also ways in which slaves could become free and members of the dominant society. The children of slaves were not held as slaves. This does not mean that this was civilized or humane but rather very different in its fundamentals. A classic example of the contrast was the janissaries from the Ottoman Empire. Initially enslaved Christians, they

enslaved as condition of indebtedness, as punishment for a crime, or as spoils of war with a rival empire, tribe, or ethnic group, the system of chattel slavery that was introduced in the Western Hemisphere in the 1500s defined entire populations as inferior and irrelevant and, therefore, subject to being raped and pillaged.

Yet another factor that we must appreciate is that the very workings of the economic system that was coming into existence at the time—capitalism—encouraged and preyed upon divisions among workers. Competition between workers for limited resources (limited because of unequal possession of wealth and power) drove down wages to the advantage of the wealthy and the employer class. One of the central divisions that was utilized to guarantee that workers would forever compete with one another in a dash to the bottom, rather than join forces, was that of race.

Race and Organized Labor in the United States

From its earliest days, organized labor in the United States was badly divided along racial, gender, and ethnic lines. Most of the early unions were either segregated by gender or prohibited women altogether. Various ethnic groups were not permitted in certain unions. Across the board, however, race was used to exclude entire populations from membership and from work. Slaves, who lacked even the most basic worker and human rights, were not permitted to unionize. The surplus that they created went directly and entirely to the slave owner. Additionally, freed Africans were locked out of the pre-Civil War labor movement, as were other populations of color, simply because of race.

became an elite guard for the Sultan and a major component of the Ottoman ruling elite (Cleveland and Bunton 2009).

As a labor movement, we must remember that almost every ethnic group in the United States has experienced exclusion and discrimination in the workplace because of who they were—how they spoke, their religion, and their general appearance.¹¹ At the very beginnings of the labor movement, in the 1840s, an entire political party, the American Party (also known as the Know Nothing movement), appeared with the purpose of stopping what they saw as the flood of Irish and German immigrants.¹² In the early twentieth century, Congress held hearings on the menace, resulting from the flood of Italian and Jewish immigrants to our nation's cities and factories, to the so-called American way of life (US Senate 1911). Not long after that German and Scandinavian Americans, who were the major portions of the working classes of the northern Midwest, essentially were told to suppress their national cultures on pain of being labeled disloyal or pro-German in the First World War.¹³

Throughout US history there have been distinctions that are clear and demonstrable regarding how various populations have been treated. In addition, the trade union movement has had a great deal of difficulty adjusting to various changes in the demographics of the United States and the implications for those changes on the nature and work of the trade union movement. The European experience in migrating to the United States was largely one of encountering great hostility but, over time, being drafted into the white race, with a condition being the virtual abandonment of their ethnicity in favor of becoming so-called white American. Though many European immigrants, upon arrival in the United States, were treated with great hostility, by and large, they were not locked out of work altogether. In many of the trades there

¹¹ I would like to acknowledge Damon Silvers for sharing his unpublished written work containing these insights.

¹² The Know Nothings felt that, like slaves, Irish and German immigrants undermined the position of white workers in America and sought their exclusion. See Anbinder 1992.

¹³ As an example, the German language used to be widely spoken in certain regions of the United States, particularly in sections of the Midwest and Pacific Northwest. But with the onset of the First World War, there was an extensive campaign against all things German. From 1918–1919, several states passed laws making it illegal to instruct children in the German language (Capozzola 2008).

emerged a predominance of this or that ethnic group. For example, in the late-nineteenth century, Polish workers filled the labor demands of Wisconsin's iron mills, while Pennsylvania's coalmines were filled with Slavic workers, both groups that were heavily discriminated against when they first arrived.¹⁴ The labor unions and specific union locals founded to represent workers in those particular sectors were typically dominated by workers from that specific ethnic group, who sought, as all unions do, to protect and raise up their communities. Ultimately, this allowed them to raise their standard of living to one that was on par with other white Americans.

One can contrast the experience of European immigrants with the experiences of former African slaves, Mexicanos, and Asian immigrants. Chinese workers in the nineteenth century, for example, might have been largely located in the construction of railroads and in mining, as we shall discuss, but this did not translate into unions dominated by or run by them (apart from an unusual history in Hawaii of Asian labor) (Takaki 1990).

This point is crucial to appreciate since there are regular counterarguments raised when the topic of race emerges to the effect that there is really no difference in the treatment of people of color in the USA from European immigrants that have arrived on our shores. Take, for example, the experiences of African Americans and Mexicanos, on the one hand, and Irish and Italians, on the other. Those who seek to deny the centrality of race will note that Irish and Italians faced discrimination when they arrived on these shores. While this point is valid, that discrimination *did not* translate into the complete disempowerment experienced by peoples of color, a disempowerment including being subjected to slavery, colonization, and genocide. As we will emphasize throughout this essay, European immigrants were, over time, absorbed into a larger white mass in which they experienced treatment and conditions very different from those

¹⁴ For an overview of Polish workers in the Midwest see, Pacyga 2003. For an overview of Slavic immigration to Pennsylvania, see Bodnar 1973.

experienced by people of color. This was very much the reality in the developing labor movement. There were no overtures toward workers of color, suggesting, for instance, that they could unionize and have local unions (or even national or internationals) where they were the predominant force. If anything, the response was dominated by the politics of exclusion.

While it is absolutely the case that there have been recurring practices of discrimination and bias committed against various migrating populations, it is also the case that certain groups were singled out for perpetual exclusion. As the United States expanded westward it captured northern Mexico in the Mexican-American War (1846–48, a war provoked by the United States). This resulted in the incorporation of not only new lands but also new populations, including both Mexicans and Native Americans (who were not immigrants since they came with the land). Almost immediately these populations experienced racial suppression as their lands were taken from them, and they were subjected to conditions that mirrored colonialism (Raat 1992).

Shortly thereafter Chinese were brought to the United States to work on the railroads, mines, and the fields. They were segregated into Chinatowns and banned from participating in most areas of the economy. They were demonized in popular culture—frequently associated in the mainstream white imagination with crime—to the point that efforts were undertaken to block their migration and to drive them out of the country entirely. These efforts culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first U.S. law that specifically banned the immigration of people based on their race (Lee 2003).¹⁵ Much the same was done with Japanese migrants who began arriving in the middle of the 1800s, and who would ultimately be blocked from further

¹⁵ For more on the general history of Asian immigration and discrimination in the United States, see Takaki 1990.

entry into the United States by a so-called “gentleman’s agreement” between the governments of the United States and Japan in 1907.¹⁶

As noted, while various European immigrant populations were subjected to ethnic discrimination and hatred, generally over one generation they were accepted into the white population. Actually one can say that they were molded into becoming white since their acceptance into whiteness involved abandoning their ethnic heritage and developing a sense of identity in relation to people with whom they had little in common.¹⁷ It also involved something that many people would rather not discuss in polite company: The process of becoming complicit, like their forefathers, in the suppression of other groups, e.g., African slaves (and later Freedmen), Mexicans, Chinese and Native Americans, as a means of proving one’s whiteness.¹⁸ [Note: Something akin to a bully enlisting someone in a horrible act in order for that person to prove themselves worthy of the bully’s respect.] Chinese, and later other immigrants from Asia, Africa (after the end of slavery), the Caribbean and Latin America were generally denied the

¹⁶ See Takaki 1990; Okihiro 2010; Tsu 2013.

¹⁷ Matthew Frye Jacobson (1998) provides an excellent historical overview in *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Jacobson argues that a series of court cases in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries helped to establish a black-white binary that diminished the racial differences of Poles, Hebrews, Slavs, and Greeks. These court cases hinged around a US Naturalization Law dating back to 1790, which held that only free white persons were eligible to naturalize as US citizens. Thus, the law helped to establish a white-nonwhite binary. The ethnic distinctions among whites were further diminished after the passage of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, which established strict immigration quotas based on population demographics from the 1890 census. The result was that the flow of immigrants from places like Poland, Greece, and Ireland was sharply reduced, and the distinctions among them, hitherto kept alive by a constant influx of new immigrants, diminished. This drew an even starker contrast in black/white relations, which were then defined by the binary logic of the Jim Crow South.

¹⁸ Roediger has argued that Irish Americans treasured and sought to protect their whiteness by the late 1800s, as it entitled them to both political rights and jobs. As Roediger (1999) documents, “Irish immigrants consistently argued that African-American workers were lazy, improvident and irresponsible. The immigrants were used to hearing such characterizations applied to themselves, and not only by political enemies but also by their own newspapers, which fretted over the need to develop a ‘work ethic’ among the newly arrived” (154). In other words, Irish immigrants set themselves apart from Blacks to claim the privileges of whiteness.

chance of becoming white.¹⁹ These patterns of racial exclusion and hierarchy framed the labor movement that developed in the 1800s and 1900s.

The trade union movement in the United States began prior to the Civil War and was divided immediately based on race and gender. From its inception, it was trapped in a bind as to how to view other workers. Were workers outside of one's union, company, etc., competitors, or were they potential allies? Did workers have anything approaching a collective interest, or was it everyone for themselves? Would white workers join with workers of color to form united labor unions? Or would they reinforce the racial hierarchy created by colonial elites—and supported by subsequent ruling groups in the republic known as the United States of America—by seeking relative advantages over other groups? These are the questions that haunted the union movement and, as we can see today, continue to exist as an apparition floating above *all* efforts by workers who seek to respond to their conditions.

The problem is easy to see as it played out historically. In 1847, in Richmond, Virginia, white industrial workers in one of the nation's first large iron foundries, the Tredegar Iron Works, went on strike (Schechter 1994). Their grievance: They were asked to train slaves to do their jobs. The white workers refused to work alongside African American slaves and were fired.²⁰ Irrespective of their attitude on race, they clearly understood that free labor cannot

¹⁹ We say *generally* because there were peculiar exceptions, such as with Arabs. Arab migrants were legally categorized as white. Many of the initial Arab migrants came from the area we know today as Lebanon and were Christians, leading a US Superior Court to rule that Lebanese and Syrians were, indeed, white. See Gualtieri 2001. This, however, did not stop anti-Arab racism from becoming a feature of life in the United States for Arabs and Arab Americans. After September 11, 2001, this anti-Arab racism became more pronounced and eliminated any notion of Arabs being considered white. It is also worth noting that the treaty that ended the Mexican-American War—the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo—legally classified Mexicans as white, but this did not translate into better treatment for Mexicanos/Chicanos who faced national chauvinism and racism from the moment that their lands were seized. See Haney-López 2006.

²⁰ I would like to acknowledge Damon Silvers for sharing his unpublished written work containing these insights.

successfully compete with slave labor. The Richmond newspapers condemned the white workers as radicals with no respect for private property.

After the Civil War, the next generation of Richmond's workers—white workers and free African American workers—organized a powerful chapter of the Knights of Labor, a remarkable display of racial unity powerful enough to win control of Richmond's city government in the 1880s.²¹ The Knights of Labor was successfully—albeit temporarily—able to win white and black workers over to the idea that they had a shared interest in collective action. This was a significant achievement at a point when what W.E.B. Dubois (1935, 28) called “the counter-revolution of property,” was underway with the Ku Klux Klan and other white paramilitary groups attacking the victories of Reconstruction.²²

At the same time and quite paradoxically, the Knights of Labor was leading efforts to stop Asian immigrants from coming to the West, revealing the limits of the interracial coalition building they were willing to pursue. In November 1885, for instance, the Knights of Labor led the charge to expel the entire Chinese community from Tacoma, Washington, angered at what they perceived as unfair labor competition from so-called “coolie” labor.²³ Similar incidents of anti-Chinese violence took place across the West. Instead of building a multi-racial movement

²¹ See Gerteis 2007, Chapter 3, 76–101.

²² Space does not permit an examination of the period known as Reconstruction (1865–1877). This was the post-Civil War period during which an effort was undertaken to transform the former Confederacy, i.e., the U.S. South. In addition to the ending of slavery, important reforms were instituted, such as voting rights for the former slaves and the introduction of public schools. The former Confederate ruling class resented this effort and, through enlisting former Confederate soldiers who were frequently unemployed, created terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan to destabilize the progressive administrations brought into existence in the South. Ultimately, the Northern industrial capitalists and their allies in the Republican Party came to an agreement with the former Southern plantocracy (a population of planters that were the dominant class in the U.S. South): Federal troops would be withdrawn from the South; the Southern plantocracy could regain its leadership of the South; and the Southern plantocracy would agree to go along with the objectives of the Northern industrial capitalists and not create further problems. Once federal troops were withdrawn the white terrorists were able to undermine the Reconstruction governments. Once the white terrorists captured power they began a process of political disenfranchisement of the African Americans and many poor whites.

²³ See Saxton 1971; Long 2003.

inclusive of all workers, the Knights focused on organizing white workers of different ethnicities, many of them immigrants themselves, around a common white identity.²⁴

It should be noted that the Knights of Labor's anti-Asian racism had a spillover impact, quite ironically, on the treatment of African American workers. When the Knights of Labor came under severe attack by employers and government, it began backtracking on matters of racial justice vis-à-vis African American workers. Local elites attacked the Knights of Labor for promoting race mixing and other alleged evils. The leadership of the Knights of Labor seemed to have thought that by backing away from Black workers they could appease their attackers. Events proved otherwise.

By the second half of the nineteenth century the trade union movement was deeply torn. It had to determine whether it would build power through an inclusive approach toward other workers or an exclusive approach. To put it another way, should unionized workers organize all who needed to be organized (i.e., those facing a common employer or in a common industry) or, in the alternative, should it limit (in whatever fashion) the numbers of workers who are eligible for the benefits of trade unionism?

There is no easy answer to this problem since any trade unionist knows that one must be careful about flooding the labor market, thereby driving down wages.²⁵ By the same token, to the extent that the trade union resembles a fortress or palace, with access limited to a special few, it becomes a source of resentment rather than a center of unity for workers. This is compounded

²⁴ See Gerteis 2007, Chapter 8, 201–10, and Roediger 1999, Part III, 93–164.

²⁵ Given that capitalism engenders competition among workers, unions emerge in order to eliminate downward competition. However, the challenge is whether eliminating competition means eliminating workers. Capital seeks to reduce the power of workers using different methods, including flooding the labor market with workers who will accept—for any number of reasons—lower compensation. Through unions, workers have a choice to make as to whether they will attempt to build their power through excluding or narrowing the number of workers in the relevant workforce. Alternatively, they will try to increase their power by organizing those workers facing the same employer or in the same industry.

when the basis of exclusion is something arbitrary like race, ethnicity, or gender. It is also self-defeating, as employers worsen the working conditions of excluded workers and use that to erode the hard-fought gains of included union members.

Following the Civil War and the further growth of the trade union movement, most unions chose the exclusive approach, maintaining intense resistance to opening up the ranks of the movement to workers of color. This would include, by the late 1800s/early 1900s, efforts to drive African American workers out of the railroads, a process done in collaboration between the railroad brotherhoods and the employer class (Foner 1981). This process of racial cleansing, which also affected the skilled trades in the South, was taking place at precisely the same time that the Reconstruction governments—pro-poor and pro-black—were being destroyed through a combination of racist terrorism (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan) and voter disenfranchisement. This was a period that witnessed the rise of Jim Crow segregation, which, by the early years of the twentieth century, had reintroduced laws enforcing a strict racial hierarchy and disenfranchised most of the Southern black population along with many of the Southern white poor.²⁶

Within the broader labor movement there was *always* a countervailing tendency, whether represented by the vacillating Knights of Labor²⁷; the United Mine Workers of America; and, in the early twentieth century, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). These organizations *to varying degrees* recognized the need to forge working-class unity and stand up to racist

²⁶ Jim Crow segregation was a form of strict racist oppression that separated populations according to racial categories. This broke down into every aspect of society, including: who could drink at which fountains; the separation of school children into racially distinct schools; hospitals for different racial groups. Racial segregation was codified by the infamous *Plessy v Ferguson* (1896) decision by the US Supreme Court. Although Jim Crow segregation was sold as allegedly beneficial to all, it was a complex system of disenfranchising African Americans and keeping them under the thumbs of the white elite, with the collaboration of most white Southerners. There are several books that document the rise of segregation and its deleterious effects on black and white workers alike. A classic that charts the role of black workers from the Civil War through the period of Reconstruction is W.E.B. DuBois *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935). The epilogue of Roediger's (1999, 167–84) *Wages of Whiteness* illustrates how segregation and racial antipathy stunted the emergence of an effective interracial working-class coalition. See also Jacobsen's (1998) *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Chapter 2, 39–90.

²⁷ Vacillating because they, on the one hand, opened their doors to freed African labor, yet, on the other hand, refused entry to Chinese.

discrimination. But, even where unions had a better approach toward race and racism, it was frequently inconsistent. The Knights of Labor's opposition to Asian workers is one example. The IWW, which vehemently opposed segregated trade unionism, at the same time seemed to miss the significance of the rise of Jim Crow segregation and its implications.²⁸

There was something else unfolding. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, there was worker organizing taking place among that segment of the workforce that we think of today as workers of color. Following the Civil War, black workers formed the Colored National Labor Union after the National Labor Union excluded African Americans and Asian Americans (Foner 1981, 22–33). Freed African American workers in the South carried out strikes over a two-year period (roughly 1866–68) during the Reconstruction era (1865–1877) to raise their living standard.²⁹ Mexican workers in the Southwest organized on both sides of the border becoming a major component of the IWW in the Southwest (and, indeed, of the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth century).³⁰ In the years following the U.S. annexation of Hawaii, Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese workers began organizing along ethnic lines into separate labor federations.³¹ And in California there was the rise of the historic Japanese-Mexican Labor Association that organized agricultural workers across racial lines (Almaguer 1984). After the capture of Puerto Rico by the United States in the Spanish-American War, an independent labor movement, led by Santiago Iglesias, emerged that played an important role on that island.³²

The point here is that there was both turbulence and a lack of unity in the larger labor movement. There were different approaches being advanced regarding how to respond to

²⁸ This may have been related, at least in part, to the *anarcho-syndicalism* of the IWW, i.e., the philosophy that encouraged the transformation of labor unions into revolutionary, anti-capitalist organizations and, at the same time, downplayed electoral/political struggles.

²⁹ See Foner 1981; Dawley 1985.

³⁰ See Weber 2012, 2016.

³¹ See Takaki 1983; Jung 2006; Okihiro 2010.

³² See Rodríguez-Silva 2012, Chapter 5, 159–86.

capitalism and how to respond to the divisions within the working class based on the system of race.

In the early twentieth century, race continued to rear its ugly head within organized labor. The American Federation of Labor, led by Samuel Gompers, though initially taking a strong stand for organizing all workers, slowly but surely devolved in a racially exclusionary direction. The racial exclusiveness of the AFL overlapped the larger exclusiveness that the federation projected with regard to who should and could be organized into labor unions. Specifically, the AFL favored the organizing of the skilled crafts.

One of the most astounding and reprehensible examples of racial exclusion was the case of the treatment of the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association (JMLA), which sought to affiliate with the AFL. In 1903, Japanese and Mexican laborers came together to contest the low wages and terrible working conditions in the sugar beet farms of Oxnard, California. But despite the striking success of this display of racial unity in garnering concessions from the American Sugar Beet Company, the AFL was not impressed. In a letter addressed to the Mexican members, the AFL told them they would be accepted into the AFL if they excluded the Japanese (Almaguer 1984). The JMLA rejected this in an eloquent and hard-hitting response. Their response read in part:

Your letter [...] in which you say the admission with us of the Japanese Sugar Beet and Farm Laborers into the American Federation of Labor cannot be considered, is received. We 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. [...]

They were not only just with us, but they were generous when one of our men was murdered by hired assassins of the oppressor of labor, they gave expression to their sympathy in a very substantial form. 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 by us in the long, hard fight which ended in a victory over the enemy. We therefore respectfully petition the A.F. of L.

to grant us a charter under which we can unite all the sugar beet and field laborers in Oxnard, without regard to their color or race. We will refuse any other kind of charter, except one which will wipe out race prejudices and recognize our fellow workers as being as good as ourselves. I am ordered by the Mexican union to write this letter to you and they fully approve its words. (Almaguer 1984, 342)

The AFL's intransigence toward workers of color did not stop there. President Gompers developed elaborate rationales for the exclusion of Black workers from AFL unions. He blamed Black workers for strikebreaking, completely ignoring the ramifications of their racial exclusion from the ranks of organized labor.

It is worth noting that the collapse of any semblance of interracial trade unionism on the part of the AFL coincided with one of the bleakest periods in U.S. history vis-à-vis race. This was the period of the emergence of Jim Crow segregation and, at the international level, the oxymoronic notion of so-called "scientific racism." The AFL went from advocating multiracial unity to silence in the face of racial segregation and oppression, to open support for segregation, including the elaborate rationales offered by Gompers mentioned in the preceding paragraph.

By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century there were two internal migrations underway. African Americans and Mexicans/Mexican Americans were moving out of their home regions into other sections of the United States in search of work, while immigrants from Europe were being blocked from entering the country—especially those who came from Southern and Eastern Europe.³³ This migration of black and Latino workers, particularly the migration of African Americans out of the South into the urban North, along with

³³ The Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 restricted the number of immigrants who could be admitted into the country to 2 percent of the number of people from that country who were already living in the United States as of the 1890 census. The intent (and effect) of this law was to curb the large number of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe—Italians, Czechs, Lithuanians, Greeks, Jews, Portuguese, and others—whose whiteness was considered questionable. Additionally, this act banned the immigration of Arabs and Asians. The intent of this law was to preserve the racial homogeneity of the United States, which many believed was under attack with the recent flood of immigrants from nations seen as racially suspect. See Ngai 2004. See also Office of the Historian, "The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act)," <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act>. Accessed December 22, 2016.

the restriction of European immigration, transformed the economic landscape. The mass production industries, e.g., steel and auto, needed workers, but this new workforce was largely ignored, if not excluded by the AFL.³⁴ In fact, many of the unions of the AFL had explicit clauses limiting membership to *white men*.

In the 1930s, an explosion took place that fundamentally transformed organized labor. The onset of the Great Depression led to unprecedented organizing of the unemployed, often across racial boundaries. Additionally, in order to avoid extinction, organized labor needed to turn its attention toward organizing the mass production industries, a point that United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) President John L. Lewis correctly understood (and acted upon).³⁵ At the same time, in order to organize those industries, the trade unions came to recognize that they would need to open their ranks to workers who, in many cases, they had demonized, i.e., workers of color. Thus, was born, first, the Committee on Industrial Organization and, later, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), committed to organizing the unorganized on an industrial basis—wall-to-wall trade unionism.³⁶ This meant addressing, in complicated ways, matters of race. To a lesser extent, the CIO was also challenged to organize women workers.³⁷

³⁴ The American Federation of Labor's affiliated unions were largely organized on a craft basis. They had no strategy for organizing the mass production industries since such industries could not be successfully organized by craft and tended to be unskilled or semi-skilled workers. Added onto this was the matter of race. Thus, the mass production industries were largely unorganized except for the work of some smaller, Left-led independent unions. This had a disproportionately negative impact on African American, Chicano, and Asian workers. The situation shifted dramatically in the 1930s.

³⁵ Lewis was the highly combative president of the UMWA from 1920 to 1960. In addition to organizing coalmine workers, Lewis was a driving force behind the establishment of the CIO, which founded several other industrial labor unions and organized millions of American workers. For more on Lewis, see Dubofsky and Van Time 1986. For more information on the turn toward unionizing mass production industries, see Brody 2005, Chapter 3, 30–45.

³⁶ The Committee for Industrial Organizations formed in 1935 to push the AFL to organize workers in mass production industries. The AFL refused, expelling CIO-organized unions from its ranks. In response, those unions formed the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) in 1938 to represent workers in these industries. For an excellent overview of the history of the industrial union movement, see Montgomery 1979; Brody 1980.

³⁷ With certain exceptions, the CIO efforts to organize women were limited. They failed to recognize the critical importance of doing so. There were, however, in agriculture, teaching, and other parts of the public sector changes that started to unfold by the early 1940s. The dramatic shift regarding women in organized labor, however, really emerged in the 1960s, both with the explosion of women in the formal workforce as well as the impact of the

Workers of color, particularly African American, Mexican/Chicano, and Asian, quickly understood the importance of what was unfolding in organized labor with the construction of the CIO. Many workers of color also understood or came to understand that they frequently occupied key sites in industries in which their vote in favor of unions and unionism could make a decisive difference.

In this setting several things unfolded. Community-based organizations among people of color began, slowly at first, to support the new industrial unionism.³⁸ A noted example of this was the altering of relations between the African American community in the San Francisco Bay Area and the West Coast branch of the International Longshoremen's Association (later the International Longshore and Warehouse Union), led by Harry Bridges. In the context of the 1934 San Francisco General Strike, the Bridges-led leadership reached out to African Americans and sought their support for the strike, and, subsequently, the union supported the entry of African Americans into the Bay Area docking industry. Almost overnight Bridges became an iconic figure for many African Americans throughout the United States. This was a significant achievement given the antipathy towards unions that existed, particularly at the elite level, within many communities of color. Among African Americans, for instance, the work of A. Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters to organize the Pullman workers took place over more than seventeen years during which it was frequently attacked by the elite elements *within* the African American community (Harris 1977).³⁹ Thus, engaging community-based organizations in what involved, sometimes, open alliances with unions was a major

women's movement (and civil rights movement) in energizing women workers to fight for changes within organized labor. See Kessler-Harris 1982.

³⁸ Neil Betten and Michael J. Austin (1990) provide an overview of community organizing, including its relationship with organized labor in their edited volume *The Roots of Community Organizing, 1917-1939*. For an interesting case study about organized labor successfully engaging with a community-based organization, see Ross 1973.

³⁹ For more information on the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porter and other union efforts among African American workers, visit www.BlackPast.org. Accessed December 18, 2016.

achievement for both the trade union movement and the progressive forces in the communities of color who were seeking social, economic, and political justice.⁴⁰

Though the National Labor Relations Act marked a major advance in the rights of workers to organize and bargain collectively—in fact, stating categorically that it was the public policy of the United States to encourage collective bargaining—it was also tinged by the smear of race, a point that, until relatively recently, was often ignored by both trade unions and labor historians. Two key groups excluded from the rights provided by the NLRA were domestic workers and agricultural workers.⁴¹ What did this have to do with race?

To win passage of what was originally entitled the *Wagner Act*, President Franklin Roosevelt's administration needed to gain the support of Southern senators and representatives who were largely part of a very conservative and extremely racist Democratic Party. In fact, the Democratic Party of the 1930s existed as almost two distinct parties under the banner of a donkey: conservative, white supremacists in the South and a range of racist machine politicians, liberals, and progressives in the North, Midwest, and parts of the West.

Conservative forces in the South and the Southwest feared the specter of trade unionism in their regions. They had two interrelated reasons. For one, they understood that trade unionism was the most successful means of raising the living standard of the working class, and this would involve the chipping away at their power, i.e., the power of the elite. Secondly, the conservative forces in the South and Southwest recognized, perhaps earlier than many, that trade unions could serve as organizations to advance the social justice demands of communities of

⁴⁰ The hostility of white labor toward workers of color gave the business elites in communities of color the rationale to attack trade unions and to discourage the involvement with trade unions of their respective workers. In the African American context, for instance, Booker T. Washington was quite open in proposing that Black workers should align themselves with the employer class rather than with (white) organized labor.

⁴¹ For a discussion of the powerful agribusiness bloc that excluded farmworkers from the protections of the NLRA, see Mooney and Majka 1995.

color, specifically African Americans in the South and Mexicans/Chicanos (as well as Native Americans) in the Southwest. Permitting the organizing of domestic workers, largely African-American and female, and agricultural workers, largely Mexican, Chicano, and Asian, was therefore seen as both an economic and political threat to elite power (Majka and Majka 1982, 108).⁴² This fear would resurface following the Second World War in the context of what came to be known as *Right to Work*.

The NLRA's exclusion of large groups of African-American, Asian, and Mexican/Chicano workers from these newly created workers' rights was both a natural extension of previous racially exclusive laws and an insidious evolution because the law established different rights based on race without referring to race explicitly. It should also be noted that the domestic and agricultural sectors were heavily female. Thus, the failure to include these sectors in the NLRA had a demonstrable impact on the unionization of women and workers of color. In effect, the specific terms of the NLRA excluded 55 percent of all African American workers and 87 percent of all wage-earning African American women (Hall 2005, 1241). Absent the protections of the NLRA, these workers continued to be subjected to the arbitrary power of the employer class, under almost feudal terms.

During the 1930s and 1940s, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans engaged the union movement. The National Negro Congress was formed in 1936 and openly threw itself into supporting the massive union drives of the 1930s and early 1940s (Gellman 2012).⁴³ In 1939, El Congreso de Pueblos de Hablan Espanola (Spanish-Speaking People's Congress) was formed, largely among Mexican Americans to, among other things,

⁴² For a contemporary account of the exclusion of domestic and agricultural workers from worker protections, see McWilliams 2000.

⁴³ More information about this National Negro Congress can be found at <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/national-negro-congress>. Accessed December 18, 2016.

support organizing the unorganized (Larralde 2004). And, in 1933, Filipino workers in the Pacific Northwest organized the Alaskan salmon canning industry (Fresco 1999). In addition, it should be noted that unions in Mexico aided CIO unions in organizing Mexican and Mexican American workers in the United States during this same period.⁴⁴

Though the 1930s was a period of some of organized labor's greatest achievements, it was also a decade during which there was an ignominious occurrence that has largely been dismissed from history and ignored by the union movement. During the period 1929–1939, somewhere between 500,000 and 2,000,000 Mexicans and Mexican Americans were deported from the United States to Mexico (Sánchez 1993, 209–26). This was in the context of the Great Depression during which time various populations, including but not limited to Mexican descendant peoples, were scapegoated for the unemployment of white Americans. In raids across the country, Mexicans and Mexican Americans were picked up by the immigration service and—irrespective of their citizenship—deported to Mexico. In 2005, California apologized for this horrible act, yet few people have recognized the depth of this tragedy.

The 1930s was also a period of the growth of forms of right-wing populism, an irrational, racist, and xenophobic movement. In the case of the United States, right-wing populism advances the idea that the United States is a white republic and “others” should be excluded. Right-wing populism reinforced the elite's racial hierarchy by arguing that there was a fixed pie (the size of which was determined by the elite, of course), and every piece given to undeserving communities of color was a piece taken away from deserving white working-class communities. Extreme right-wing movements competed with trade unions and other progressive organizations,

⁴⁴ Additionally, Mexican workers played an integral role in the U.S. labor movement maintaining picket lines in Chicago steel mines, fighting for higher wages and better living conditions in Southwestern coal mines, and organizing farm and cannery workers for the CIO, among other things (Ruíz 1987; Vargas 2005).

which argued that we all should unite together to win a bigger pie, to win the hearts and minds of white workers (Berlet and Lyons 2000, 131–44).

As the 1930s shifted into the 1940s, and it became clear that the world was headed toward another great war, industry in the United States began to regain ground. The economy finally started to more fully emerge from the Depression. Yet for workers of color, and particularly for African Americans, there was little equity. Pleas to the Federal Government went largely unanswered as African Americans saw their chances at improving their living standard drift further away.

Thus, it was A. Philip Randolph who, once again, stepped forward, in this case not only advancing the interests of African American workers as union members but also speaking on behalf of a community that was disenfranchised. He and other Black leaders formed the *March on Washington Movement* and threatened to march 10,000 African Americans on Washington DC, and, as interest in this march grew, 100,000.⁴⁵ Roosevelt, despite pressure from the Right, finally agreed to the signing of an historic executive order desegregating the war industry. There was much opposition to this executive order. It may be surprising to note that, even at points during the war when Allied victory was far from certain, there were strikes that took place in the war industry against desegregation despite the impact on the war effort (Glaberman 1980). Much as the problem often encountered by CIO organizers, there existed a set of white workers who had no interest in working next to, let alone joining with, workers of color.

In 1942, another ignominious act unfolded, this time targeting Japanese and Japanese Americans. In an act that was subsequently repudiated by most of US society, Japanese and Japanese Americans in the mainland United States were imprisoned in detention

⁴⁵ For an historical overview of the March on Washington Movement, see Sugrue 2008, 32–85. For a brief overview, visit BlackPast.org at <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/march-washington-movement-1941-1947>. Accessed December 18, 2016.

camps/concentration camps for fear that they would collaborate with Imperial Japan. This act, which was nothing short of racist hysteria, was not based on any facts or intelligence gathering and certainly did not mirror the way that German Americans and Italian Americans were treated during the War.⁴⁶ Yet, this imprisonment was broadly supported by the union movement, which during the pre-war period had positioned itself as a voice for democracy, though did not lead opposition to this travesty.

The end of the Second World War presented major challenges for organized labor. Demobilization of troops corresponded to the traumatic expulsion of women from many of the jobs that they had occupied during the war—this marked yet another redefinition of the role of women and the family.⁴⁷ This expulsion of women workers was met with little opposition from the union movement. A similar phenomenon occurred with respect to African American workers.

In 1946, a major strike wave ensued, frightening the powers that be. Republicans, capturing Congress in November 1946, began a counter-attack against organized labor. Using the symbolism of the Cold War—which had just recently begun—corporate America and their conservative political allies began moving against organized labor and the victories that it had won. The label *communist* was placed on almost anything connected to progressive action and

⁴⁶ The baselessness of the claims against persons of Japanese descent in the United States are dramatized by the fact that, in Hawaii, where Japanese formed a much larger proportion of the population (by the Second World War, the Japanese population in Hawaii numbered approximately 158,000, nearly 40 percent of Hawaii's total population) just over 1,400—less than 1 percent of Japanese living on the island—were ever interned. The sugar industry was too dependent on their labor. See Okihiro 2010, 269–73. See also PBS, “The War At Home: Japanese Americans,” https://www.pbs.org/thewar/at_home_civil_rights_japanese_american.htm. Accessed December 19, 2016.

⁴⁷ During the war women were encouraged to assume myriad of non-traditional roles from ferrying aircraft to Europe to technical positions in manufacturing. Childcare centers were set up in factories so that the children could be cared for during working hours. Changes took place outside of work as well, such as the creation of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, dramatized in the 1992 film *A League of Their Own*. With the end of the war, however, there was a dramatic shift back and away from such roles and an attempt to reassert traditional and subordinate roles for women. See May 1988.

efforts at deep, structural reforms to the US political and economic system (Lipsitz 1994, Part II, 99–156; Lichtenstein 2002, Chapters 3 & 4, 98–177).

Organized labor was challenged by this turn of events. It had embarked on an effort to organize the South, known as “Operation Dixie.” But due to a combination of poor leadership, lack of roots in the South, fear of red-baiting, and an overall reluctance to tackle racism, Operation Dixie failed miserably (Griffith 1988).⁴⁸ Though there were several advances in various portions of the South, such as the work of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural & Allied Workers (FTA), particularly in North Carolina, the major sites of organizing flopped (especially in the textile industry). The South and Southwest have had the lowest percentage of union members in the United States, thus contributing to a lower living standard.

In 1947, organized labor faced the challenge of what came to be known as the Taft-Hartley Act, amendments to the National Labor Relations Act that aimed to shackle the trade union movement.⁴⁹ Taft-Hartley weakened the ability of workers to organize and engage in struggles for collective bargaining. It had an anti-communist clause that was used to eliminate union leaders who were or were alleged to have been communists. In the case of union leaders of color, allegations of communist beliefs and affiliation could lead to their outright deportation, as was the case of Ferdinand Smith, the Secretary-Treasurer of the National Maritime Union. Taft-Hartley also contained Section 14(b), a provision that granted states the ability to implement so-called “Right to Work” laws.

⁴⁸ To learn about one of the organizers involved with Operation Dixie, Moranda Smith, and her efforts in the South, visit <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/smith-moranda-1915-1950>. Accessed, December 19, 2016.

⁴⁹ The Taft-Hartley Act modified the NLRA to restrict legitimate union actions and limit the power of the rank and file. Among other provisions, the act mandated several weeks’ notice before workers could undertake a strike and erected legal barriers to wildcat, sympathy, and jurisdictional strikes, with the ultimate effect of diminishing workers’ power. See Lipsitz 1994, 178–179.

While the stated objective of Right to Work laws was to give individual workers the opportunity to opt out of union membership, most labor activists are aware of the sophistry of that argument. Right-to-Work destroys the right of union members to have a union shop in which everyone is a represented member and everyone contributes, allowing, instead, some free-riding workers to receive representation without paying for it. The real objectives were actually two-fold, only one of which organized labor has focused upon in its critique of the Act.

The first objective was to undermine the ability of unions to obtain the resources that they needed to operate, including to organize, bargain collectively, and fully represent the workers in their bargaining units. There is no other institution in the United States that has a statutory obligation to represent a population but is denied the right and ability to obtain the resources necessary to exercise that representation.

Yet the other objective helps one to understand why Right to Work was centered in the South and the Southwest. Much like the earlier opposition to the NLRA including domestic workers and agricultural workers, the elites in the South and Southwest saw with their own eyes how attractive unionism was for workers of color. They also saw that unions, in addition to raising the living standards of workers of color, could and did coalesce with other social movements to challenge power. The Southern and Southwestern elites did not want to see instruments emerge in their regions that could build power for racially oppressed populations, let alone unite the racially oppressed with the white worker. Thus, Right to Work was a means of weakening, if not annihilating, a mechanism that could be used to build power for African Americans in the South, Asian nationalities largely on the West Coast, and for Mexicans, Chicanos, and Native Americans in the Southwest.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ For more on the relationship between Right-to-Work laws and racism, see Boyle and Hureauux 2016.

The attacks on organized labor following 1946, along with the confusion, internal struggle (if not, civil war) and disorganization associated with the Cold War's impact on the trade union movement, weakened its ability to fully participate as a social movement for the expansion of democracy. The impact of the Cold War on organized labor, though touched upon in history books, was devastating and continued—in one form or another—through the middle of the 1990s. Criticisms of US foreign policy were jumped upon as allegedly being pro-communist and unpatriotic. Foreign-born activists, some of whom played major roles in the US trade union movement (and in other movements and sectors of society) were, quite literally, driven out of the country.⁵¹ Unions that took strong stands against racism were defined by their opponents as being pro-communist precisely because of their stands against racism. In Washington State, AFT Local 401, which represented faculty at the University of Washington, was disbanded due to allegations of communist influence.⁵² IAM Local 751 was hounded due to such allegations, as well as other unions such as the ILWU and the Newspaper Guild.⁵³

The Cold War witch-hunts had a profound impact on restricting the growth of the union movement, not simply in numerical terms but also in conceptual terms. The broad social vision that had begun to emerge in mainstream organized labor in the 1930s and early 1940s dissipated from much of the movement as the fear of questioning the operation of US society rose to a boiling point. Elites raised the specter of communism against unions in the 1950s and 1960s in

⁵¹ Ernesto Mangaoang and Chris Mensalvas, leaders of the Seattle-based Local 37 ILWU were threatened with deportation to their native Philippines in a communist witch-hunt that lasted from 1948-1954. Though they were never deported, the legal battle drained the union's resources, devastating their organizing efforts (DeVera 1994). For more on the Taft-Hartley Act and its effects on unions, see Lipsitz, Chapter 7, 157–81.

⁵² The full story of AFT Local 401, including the expulsion of faculty members for alleged communist ties, can be found at "The Great Depression in Washington State," an online history project. See Andrew Knudsen, "Communism, Anti-Communism, and Faculty Unionization: The American Federation of Teachers' Union at the University of Washington, 1935-1948," Pacific Northwest Labor & Civil Rights Projects, http://depts.washington.edu/depress/AFT_Local_401.shtml. Accessed December 19, 2016.

⁵³ Polly Reed Myers (2015) covers the harassment of IAM Local 751 for alleged communist ties in *Capitalist Family Values: Gender, Work, and Corporate Culture at Boeing*. For a more general overview of organized labor, see Cherney et al. 2004.

much the same way as their predecessors had raised allegations of “race-mixing” against the Knights of Labor in the 1880s, using both to intimidate union workers and discourage their efforts to fight the racial caste system. In the case of the South, tragedy unfolded in such a manner that while Operation Dixie was collapsing, what came to be known as the Civil Rights Movement was emerging and the two movements had little to do with one another, exceptions noted of course.⁵⁴

Here lay one of the great paradoxes in the history of organized labor. In the aftermath of the Second World War the living standard for the average working person increased steadily (up till roughly 1975). Yet this increase was not equitable by any stretch of the imagination. As noted earlier, women were driven out of high-paying employment at the end of the war, and a gender differential in payment was rarely challenged. Racial differentials in employment continued to exist except where certain unions, e.g., the Packinghouse Workers, took up the struggle against such divisions.⁵⁵ In addition, certain key benefits for veterans, e.g., the GI Bill, were implemented in a discriminatory fashion, frequently disenfranchising veterans of color (which led to major protests including, but not limited to, the formation of groups, such as the American GI Forum among Chicanos).⁵⁶ Two key provisions of the GI Bill—educational benefits and loans for housing—did not provide the same benefits for black veterans as they did for whites. Most southern universities did not accept black students until well into the Civil

⁵⁴ There were unions that recognized the importance of the growing Black Freedom Movement and other freedom movements, e.g., the Chicano movement, though most of mainstream organized labor did not recognize the strategic linkages that could be built between the various movements and the impact that such linkages could have (and still can) on the future of democracy in the United States. For more on the disconnection between organized labor and the Civil Rights Movement, see Mary Dudziak 2000.

⁵⁵ In 1950, the United Packinghouse Workers (UPWA) established an anti-discrimination department to end racial discrimination in meat packing plants. At the urging of activist Charles Arthur Hayes, UPWA established their headquarters in an African American community and fought against segregated housing patterns (Halpern and Horowitz 1999). See also BlackPast.org’s article on Hayes, <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/hayes-charles-arthur-1918-1997>. Accessed December 19, 2016.

⁵⁶ The differential started prior to even provisions of the Bill. African American soldiers were frequently dishonorably discharged, making them ineligible to receive appropriate benefits.

Rights period, and many banks refused to make loans to blacks, leaving many blacks unable to take advantage of the privileges they earned through military service (Katznelson 2005). Thus, two key avenues of accumulating wealth and raising one's standard of living were cut off for African American veterans. In a moment when and where conditions were such that there could have been more equitable growth, the racial division that has haunted America since colonial times revealed itself once again.

The bulk of organized labor did nothing about this racial differential. Whether it was a matter of a differential in employment rates or a racial differential within industries, most of the movement either feared that taking on such matters would antagonize whites, or they, themselves, believed that such differentials were acceptable if everyone's lives improved, i.e., the misleading notion that a rising tide raises all boats. Ironically, the existence of such differentials in treatment had the effect of dragging everyone down. Among other things, preserving the differential became an objective of many white workers rather than collective improvement. At the same time, the existence of a recognized differential meant that there was always a cheaper source of labor, i.e., a constant threat to, in this case, the white workforce. Defending the differential was the equivalent of placing an anchor around the leg of a runner.

The racial differentials in treatment were not acceptable in communities of color and among workers of color. As the Civil Rights Movement began to emerge from the Second World War there were reverberations within organized labor. The efforts to desegregate Major League Baseball—resulting in Jackie Robinson's historic rise in the Brooklyn Dodgers, followed by other Black players—and to desegregate the US military were clear indications that the status quo was no longer acceptable and such efforts would, inevitably, spread to other segments of the economy.

Organizations emerged among workers of color (and their allies) to respond to the increased demand for equity within the house of labor. This took various forms including both national and local formations. In 1948, the Association Nacional Mexico-Americana was formed with the support of some unions—most especially the legendary Mine, Mill & Smelter Workers—to promote the unionization of Mexican and Chicano workers as well as to fight racist discrimination.⁵⁷ The National Negro Labor Council was formed in 1951 to press the CIO to fulfill its promises to Black workers, including addressing the job crisis facing Black workers (Foner 1981). In the late 1950s, A. Philip Randolph led in the formation of the Negro American Labor Council (NALC) a prominent group that conceptualized the legendary August 1963 March on Washington (the effort merging with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference) (Kersten 2015).

The era of the Civil Rights Movement displayed the tensions within organized labor. Many state federations of labor in the South were torn apart in response to the Civil Rights Movement. The national AFL-CIO refused to support the 1963 March on Washington. Nevertheless, the same national AFL-CIO was a key player in the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

During that entire time the attitude toward race within the house of labor zig-zagged. The 1963 March on Washington, for instance, was conceptualized by Randolph's NALC as a response to the jobs crisis facing Black America. The NALC was attempting to ring the warning bell about the encroachment of automation on the manufacturing workforce and its implications. Like much else in America, workers of color serve as the canaries in the coal mine when it comes to changes in the economy. The dramatic developments that were felt in the 1970s in the

⁵⁷ The 1954 film *Salt of the Earth* dramatizes the plight of Mexican-American mine workers against racial discrimination in their working conditions. For a scholarly treatment of the formation of the Association Nacional Mexico-Americana, see Pulido 2016.

working class overall, including plant closures and automation (much of which was associated with the rise of neoliberal globalization), was felt earlier by African American, Chicano, and Puerto Rican workers who watched their jobs and opportunities slowly disappear. Yet this was not declared to be a crisis and received precious little attention within the house of labor.⁵⁸

A second and highly controversial matter involved efforts to desegregate the building trades, particularly beginning around 1960. Many of the building trades unions had white-male-only clauses in their constitutions and saw the demand to desegregate and be inclusive of African American, Puerto Rican, Asian American, Native American, and Chicano workers as intrusive in the internal affairs of their respective organizations. This set off a conflagration that would continue for years, including numerous law suits, civil disobedience actions by workers of color demanding jobs and equity, and other challenges to the practices of the industry. In Washington State, there was the rise of the United Construction Workers Association that pressed the case for employment equity in the building trades, ultimately resulting in the Seattle Building Trades Decree.⁵⁹

Ironically, while many of the unions in the building trades were resisting desegregation, the right wing in the building and construction trades industry, represented by the Associated Builders & Contractors (ABC), were crafting a strategy to turn the entire industry non-union. Basing itself in rural and suburban areas, and particularly in those regions of lower union concentration, ABC mounted a guerrilla war against the union movement, including efforts to try to convince communities of color that unionized construction had little interest in the well-being

⁵⁸ Nancy MacLean (2006) provides excellent background for these downward trends in the economy and how they affected workers of color and women in *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace*. For more on plant closures and automation and their effect on the working class, see Cowie 2010.

⁵⁹ There were various organizations that were formed during this period across the United States. Some functioned as independent unions; others as advocacy groups; and others as components of training programs. The Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), though now a quite conservative organization, was very active in the early 1960s on matters of employment discrimination. See Sugrue 2008, 286–312. For more on the Seattle Building Trades decree, see Gould 1977, 281–423.

of communities of color. Since their formation in the 1950s, ABC has grown into a major force, leading the charge for the annihilation of unions in the building and construction industry.⁶⁰

The battles in the building trades were only one front in a larger struggle to change the shape and complexion of organized labor. As the 1960s moved toward the 1970s, independent organizations began to emerge within the ranks of the existing trade union movement seeking to speak on behalf of constituencies that had hitherto felt excluded. This included workers of color and, later, women, who created caucuses, clubs, and associations that served multiple purposes including social and advocacy. Eventually efforts were taken at the national level to build what came to be known as constituency groups associated with organized labor.

These challenges were frequently painful. The trade union movement was not only being asked to be inclusive of groups that, in some cases, had been literally excluded. It was also being asked to take on a new and vital role: as an advocate for genuine equity in the workplace and the economy. This meant challenging all forms of racist (and later sexist) discrimination being carried out by employers. But it also meant opening opportunities for previously excluded and/or marginalized groups within the ranks of organized labor (MacLean 2006). For some white workers, such an effort was perceived as a threat rather than as an instrument toward the building of genuine unity among workers. This tension and fear continues to this day and helps to explain the sympathy for right-wing populism that has arisen within sections of the white working class (including within the trade union movement) even when it is counter to their short-term and long-term interests.⁶¹

The 1970s represented a decisive turning point for US workers and for the US trade union movement. Race was one significant part of this shift.

⁶⁰ For more on the antiunion efforts and tactics of the ABC, see Moberg 2012.

⁶¹ Kim Phillips-Fein (2009) gives a nuanced overview of the rise of the Right in *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan*.

From the late 1940s onward, the bulk of organized labor lost or abandoned its belief in the need for the movement to articulate a sense of broad social and economic justice. Particularly in the aftermath of the Cold War shakeup within organized labor, the movement's focus turned increasingly inward. There were no great organizing campaigns and there was little focus on workers of color, at least till the late 1960s, when efforts, such as in the work of the New York-based Local 1199, AFSCME in parts of the South, and the renowned United Farm Workers appeared on the scene. In fact, there was a sense of alienation that existed in many quarters between organized labor—viewed as “white labor”—and communities of color, with the contradictions between communities of color and the building trades unions being a classic example.

If this situation was not bad enough, the altering of the global economy and the development of what we know of today as *neoliberal globalization* (or hyper capitalism) threw the working class for a loop. The living standard of the average working person began to drop by the middle of the decade. Production facilities began to shut down and/or relocate. Technological changes, some of which had been felt by workers of color as early as the late 1950s, were now spreading throughout the workforce, changing fundamentally the way work was conducted.⁶² Added to this, subcontracting and the restructuring of work, let alone the direct and brutal assault on unions (e.g., the destruction of PATCO), destabilized the entire existence of most workers. Finally, the workforce itself was changing in dramatic fashion, particularly with more women in the formal workforce.

This shift in the economy had a devastating impact on workers of color. The racial differential reared its head once again such that, as the living standard for all workers dropped,

⁶² Jefferson Cowie's (2010) *Stayin' Alive* is an excellent cultural history of the economic changes of the 1970s.

the living standard for workers of color was generally below that of whites, sometimes by dramatic proportions. Cities that had been homes to thriving industries, e.g., Detroit and Pittsburgh, suffered immeasurably through the reorganization of global capitalism. Cities were being hollowed out and communities of color were frequently trapped within them.⁶³

At the same time, there was a paradox underway in several major metropolitan areas. A segment of the employer class, which came to be known by the acronym FIRE (Finance, Insurance, & Real Estate), was becoming the dominant sector in the business world in these major cities. FIRE began to advance a theory for the reorganization of key cities that included driving out the working class and communities of color. We now know this process as *gentrification*, and it included not only the transformation of neighborhoods. But it also included the elimination of sources of employment for low- and middle-income workers and the introduction of dramatic land speculation. It is important to note that the increase in land speculation, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, had the impact of suppressing the introduction of new industries because of the unavailability of land and space (Sugrue 1996).

Beginning in the 1940s, many white workers and their families took advantage of the opportunity to move to the suburbs, an opportunity denied to workers of color. Thus, much of the base of organized labor did not perceive these changes as being a threat to their specific niche in the economy.⁶⁴ Organized labor failed to respond to both the changes underway in the cities and the larger impact of neoliberal globalization. Organized labor seemed to believe that these changes were out of its control and would need to play themselves out. Rather than being or

⁶³ Thomas Sugrue (1996) provides a very detailed case study of this process in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*.

⁶⁴ Suburbanization, which followed the Second World War, was very much affected by patterns of racial discrimination in employment, housing, and education. Entire neighborhoods and cities were off-limits to people of color through a process called *redlining*: housing loans were not made available to people of color and school districts were regularly segregated. See Sugrue 1996, 181–208.

becoming an ally for those communities that saw themselves as being squeezed by neoliberal globalization and by FIRE, organized labor came to be viewed by many as an observer. This meant, in effect, that, rather than organized labor being a champion of thoroughgoing economic justice, it was viewed—as opinion polls began to say—as good for its own members but not so much for those outside of its ranks.

It was inevitable that organized labor would move to reverse the crisis facing the working class, but it has found itself confronting a cascading set of problems in which race has been—and remains—quite central. The declining living standard for all workers in the 1970s, but in this case now also for white workers, was something for which whites were entirely unprepared to experience. The assumption, particularly after the Second World War, was that the living standard for workers generally, but for white workers especially, would continually improve. It was, to a great degree, accepted that there would remain a certain level of misery among communities of color since, after all, that is the way things have always been.

After the economic downturn of the 1970s, the challenges for workers generally, and for organized labor in particular, deepened. The demands by communities of color for equity, which had accompanied the rise of various social movements beginning in the 1940s, e.g., African American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Asians, Native Americans, were being reinterpreted by Rightwing charlatans as antithetical to improvement for whites (MacLean 2006, 225–61). This line of argument could be found directly in George Wallace's (of Alabama) campaigns for President, but equally—though more subtly—in the Richard Nixon campaigns (1968 and 1972) and later, that of Ronald Reagan (1980 and 1984). In more extreme form, it could be found in the growing chorus of voices in the Right-wing populist movements (including neo-fascists), most recently by the Tea Party and the successful Donald Trump 2016 Presidential campaign.

This Right-wing populism spoke to the fears of whites as the demographics of the country changed and, at the same time, their own living standards declined. Right-wing populism offered simple—though incorrect—answers to the question of “why can I no longer access the American Dream?” There had to be someone to blame, and Right-wing populists have pointed to specific targets including, but not limited to, African Americans, Jews, immigrants of color, feminists, and the LGBT community. Until relatively recently, organized labor had little to say to the white worker who could not figure out why their situation seemed to be imploding.

To the point, organized labor did very little, historically and particularly after 1950, to lay the groundwork for a response to this crisis. It shied away from discussing race, gender, and foreign policy. Indeed, it even shied away from discussing class! It largely acted as if it was enough to convince its members that union membership brought with it living standard improvements until those same union members witnessed many of their organizations devastated by the employer class. The union movement also focused extensively on trade policy and “Buy American” campaigns. This focus occurred in the absence of a broader analysis and strategy that spoke to the way capitalism was evolving and the crying need for a redistributionist strategy that was truly equitable (Frank 1999)—not to mention a strategy that promoted global worker solidarity against neoliberal globalization.⁶⁵

By failing to address the racial differential, how it came into existence, and what purposes it serves, organized labor found itself entering a battle with archaic weapons and few

⁶⁵ It is important to note that since the 1980s, some sections of organized labor have chosen to speak up about matters relative to US foreign policy, in fact going beyond discussions of trade. During the 1980s, several major unions, including the United Auto Workers, Communications Workers of America, AFSCME, and the National Education Association, openly distinguished themselves from the national AFL-CIO through their criticism of US foreign policy (and specifically, US involvement in the various wars in Central America and US government failure to take a tough stand against the apartheid regime in South Africa).

supplies. It did not seem to be able to answer the question of why the economy was crushing workers—including white workers—why workers of color continued to demand justice, and who, precisely, was today’s enemy?

The absence of an organizing strategy that targeted the South and the Southwest was also symptomatic of the larger problem. The South and the Southwest have been bastions of anti-worker/anti-union efforts for decades. Yet, in those same regions, there have been significant progressive mass movements that have fought for equity and power. Organized labor’s efforts in those regions have been half-hearted. After the collapse of Operation Dixie, little was done until the early 1980s when the AFL-CIO attempted the Houston Organizing Project.⁶⁶ That failed. In 2000, the AFL-CIO revisited Southern organizing and commissioned preparatory work on such a project, yet this failed when affiliates of the AFL-CIO responded anemically.

The absence of a labor base in the South has contributed to the solid, reactionary nature of much of Southern politics. Where workers are organized in trade unions, there is a tendency toward more progressive politics. But entire parts of the South and Southwest are the equivalent of deserts when it comes to labor unions.

Neoliberal globalization, along with the history of US foreign policy, compounded these problems through increased immigration.⁶⁷ As noted earlier, immigration has always been a hot-button issue, whether the immigrants are arriving from Europe or from other parts of the world. That said, and as a reminder, immigrants from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America, experience the United States very differently than do immigrants from Europe. Take, for

⁶⁶ Amy Forester (2001) discusses the AFL-CIO’s efforts in the Houston Organizing Project in “Confronting the Dilemma of Organizing: Obstacles and Innovations at the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute,” in *Rekindling the Movement: Labor’s Quest for Relevance in the 21st Century*, ed. Lowell Turner et al.

⁶⁷ Migration, globally, is at historic proportions. Economic policies carried out largely by countries of Western Europe, North America, and Japan, have contributed to dramatic economic development. To this would need to be added the environmental crisis (which is eliminating certain countries and areas); civil wars; and the legacy of Western colonialism and the slave trade.

instance, the issue of undocumented immigration. During the 1980s, documented and undocumented workers were arriving on our shores from various parts of the world but one key location was Ireland.

When it came to this wave of Irish immigration, whether documented or undocumented, there was no hysteria suggesting that they were taking the jobs of Americans. There were no mass roundups. In fact, there were significant efforts in Congress to make special arrangements for Irish immigrants.⁶⁸ All of this was transpiring while immigrants from the Dominican Republic (and other locations in the global South) were facing intense harassment. Irish immigrants were discouraged from building a common cause with Dominicans and other immigrants from the global South because it was suggested that a deal could be arrived at on their behalf.

Immigrants from the global South—Africa, Asia, Caribbean, Latin America—have found themselves to be the targets of xenophobic hatred for the mere fact that they are seeking a better life. But it gets worse. Many of these same immigrants from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Asia are arriving from countries where the United States was directly involved in interfering in the internal affairs of their respective nations. This might have taken the form of direct governmental involvement, e.g., the US colonization of the Philippines, or the involvement of US-based corporations, e.g., United Fruit in Latin America.

Immigrants from the global South are, unless they are deemed to be particularly useful and exceptional, the “Other.” They are racialized. A classic example is the proclamation by Donald Trump that immigrants from Mexico bring with them crime (an argument, we noted

⁶⁸ A *New York Times* article from 1989 reported that the city of Boston embraced the recent influx of undocumented Irish immigrants. See Gold 1989. As an example of this, Connecticut Representative Bruce Andrew Morrison introduced legislation in 1990 to provide visas for immigrants who had been disadvantaged by the earlier 1965 immigration legislation; the law passed, and Irish immigrants received some 40 percent of these visas. See Lobo and Salvo 1998.

earlier, that was used against the Chinese for more than a century), thus justifying his call for a wall on the border.⁶⁹ The obvious question is this: if Trump is correct, what about the other populations within which there are major sources of crime, e.g., Russian immigrants and the Russian mafia? It is the racialization of migrants, as exemplified by Trump's charlatanism, which demonstrates the evolution of race in America. Race is not now and never has been simply a matter of white versus black. Rather it has been about the establishment of a hierarchy of domination, exploitation, and control in the interests of the employer class.

Sections of organized labor began to appreciate the importance of organizing immigrants—both documented and undocumented—in the late 1980s. As workforces underwent ethnic/racial transformations, immigrants were frequently unavoidable. In various ways unions, as diverse as SEIU, UNITE HERE (and prior to their merger, UNITE and HERE separately), the Carpenters, LIUNA, UFCW, and the IUPAT appreciated the significance of organizing immigrants. Some of these and other unions did a phenomenal job in terms of outreach and organizing, and they are stronger for it, e.g., SEIU for the famous “Justice for Janitors” campaign (which sought to organize or, in some cases, re-unionize janitorial workers in major buildings).

What the unions were not very good at, however, was linking issues of immigration and issues of race. When employers tried to play off African Americans and Puerto Ricans against Latino immigrants, organized labor was largely silent and had little to say about what was going on other than that unity is important. Nor has the movement verbalized very clearly the way immigration has been racialized, as noted earlier with some immigrants (specifically from

⁶⁹ As part of his announcement that he was running for president, Donald Trump said of Mexican immigrants, “They’re sending people [to the United States] that have lots of problems, and, they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” See Lee 2015.

Europe) being treated very differently than other immigrants (from the global South) irrespective of whether they are documented or undocumented.

There have been examples where unions have stepped up to the plate to not only organize immigrants but to fight for the unity of workforces that include immigrants and non-immigrants. The United Food and Commercial Workers, for example, led a successful organizing effort of pork processing workers at the Smithfield facility in Tar Heel, North Carolina. A workforce that was divided among white Americans, African Americans, and Latino immigrants was successfully united in a common struggle for equity, justice, and unionization.⁷⁰ This effort demonstrated that a genuine working unity can be built, despite the obstacles that are frequently put in the way by the employer class and their allies in government. There are, of course, examples where the union movement has taken a pass on building such unity or has thought that addressing the tough issues of race and/or immigration could be avoided by a strict focus on the narrowest of economic issues. Such an approach has generally led to failure.

Conclusion

The changing demographics of the United States, the reorganization of global capitalism, changing gender roles (and expectations) along with the alterations of race relations in the United States over the last fifty years have created a situation of great unease, particularly among white workers. This has laid the ground work for the growth of the cancer of Right-wing populism. Right-wing populism is a political current that reacts against progressive social changes; roots itself in an irrational view of the world; and tends to be patriarchal, racist, and xenophobic. In the case of the United States, Right-wing populism suggests that the white population is under

⁷⁰ For more information on this historic contract, see <http://www.ufcw.org/2009/07/01/local-1208-members-ratify-first-contract-with-smithfield-in-tar-heel-n-c/>. Accessed December 21, 2016.

attack by “Others,” and that something needs to be done about it. Though Right-wing populists can, at various moments, criticize corporate America, they mainly seek scapegoats, such as Jews, Blacks, Latino immigrants, Muslims, women, and others for the plight of white people generally and white men in particular. At present, Right-wing populism has particularly focused on the matter of immigration from the global South, as well as the overall transformation of the demographics of the United States.

Organized labor finds itself in a footrace with Right-wing populism in its attempt to respond to the anxiety among white workers and to accurately focus their attention on the true sources of their declining living standards. Organized labor is losing to Right-wing populism among white workers. The major source is neoliberal capitalism rather than: This or that ethnic group; women who speak up for their rights; or LGBT folks seeking basic equality and tolerance. Unfortunately, most of organized labor has refused to engage its members in this discussion, in part as a legacy of the Cold War and the fear that to really discuss class, and to add onto that discussion matters of race and gender—and the way that they interrelate—will subject organized labor to red-baiting, further marginalization, and potentially irreparable infighting.

Despite these and other obstacles, it is the fate of organized labor to confront the system of race if it is to EVER understand the true nature of US capitalism. The question is whether there is sufficient *will* to confront it as part of its work toward a labor renaissance and the winning of justice and consistent democracy in the United States.

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