

# Anti-Racism, Black Workers, and Southern Labor Organizing: Historical Notes on a Continuing Struggle

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The success of labor organizing in the South has always hinged to a large degree on the extent to which unions and workers have been able to overcome racism among whites and to incorporate black leadership and support for unions. On the other hand, white supremacy and privilege, entrenched through a long history of slavery and segregation, has provided one of the foremost obstacles to unions and social change in the region. As today's labor movement makes new efforts to build a united struggle for social and economic justice, it is important to understand this history and remember why the battle against racism must remain at the forefront of our efforts to organize workers. This article summarizes the historical role of racism in undermining unions and movements for social change in the South. This history suggests that the struggle against racism and white privilege have been defining issues for southern organizing.

## **The Unfulfilled Promise of the "Negro-Labor Alliance"**

In his only speech before the AFL-CIO, in 1961, Martin Luther King, Jr., reminded unionists of the importance of what people at that time called the "Negro-Labor Alliance." King, A. Phillip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, and others in the 1960s sought a majority coalition led by unions and people of color that could implement not only equal rights before the law but substantive economic and social justice. In King's speech, he reviewed the progress *made through labor organizing* and explained the ways that the demands of

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civil rights and labor organizations reinforced each other. "History is a great teacher," King said, and one thing it taught was that minorities and the labor movement are together in the same struggle (King, 1961).

However, the history was also more complicated than that. Many unions at the national level and the AFL-CIO as a federation squarely supported civil rights laws, but King and other civil rights leaders remained painfully aware of the role that unions played in blocking black economic and social advances. In his speech, King boldly laid bare some of the contradictions between labor's professed support of civil rights and the reality of pervasive racism within many unions. He repeated criticisms which Randolph, the NAACP, and others had been making that numerous unions "contributed to the degraded economic status of the Negro" by excluding blacks from membership, from apprenticeship programs, and from skilled jobs. Particularly in the referral unions in the skilled trades and in the railroad brotherhoods, whites had long used unions to keep black workers out (King, 1961; see Hill, 1982, 1984).

King called on union leaders, as Randolph had many times, to "root out vigorously every manifestation of discrimination" in internationals, locals, and central labor bodies, and to unite with the civil rights community. Instead, however, the AFL-CIO leadership temporized. It had not hesitated to use centralized power from the top down to expel unions because of communist leadership. But when it came to expelling or disciplining unions for practicing segregation and exclusion, the AFL-CIO pleaded that its powers were limited by the "local autonomy" of its member unions.

As the 1960s wore on, most AFL-CIO unions put increasing distance between themselves and civil rights activists. As King came out against the Vietnam war, as Black Power became a rallying cry and ghetto rebellions swept through cities, many unionists supported U.S. military intervention abroad and "law and order" at home. Many whites had sympathized with blacks when they were being beaten on the ground by southern sheriffs during the first phase of the civil rights movement. But the second phase of the struggle demanded economic equality, decent housing, schools and jobs, an end to white control over the nation's resources. As King told shop stewards in the Teamsters union in 1967, when African-Americans moved beyond demands for civil rights laws, "they found that many of their white allies had quietly disappeared" (King, 1967). Many white unionists, like many other white Americans, deserted the freedom movement when it began demanding not only the right to sit at the table, but an equal place at the table. But in truth, many whites had never even accepted the first phase of



the struggle for equal rights before the law. This was the historical legacy of generations of white supremacy, one which had betrayed and undermined the labor movement at every turn in the South.

### **The Delusions of "White Supremacy"**

Labor historians have long documented how capitalists used racism and racial division to make their profits. This was fundamental in the South, where profits were premised on keeping black workers at the bottom of the social order. First, southern slaveholders accumulated tremendous wealth by denying African-Americans any wages at all. After emancipation, southern capitalists continued to enforce cheap wages through a legally mandated system of segregation. Turning whites against blacks and denying blacks the right to organize, vote, or in any way act as the equal of whites, this system made it nearly impossible to organize the South's interracial working class (Honey, 1993; Foner, 1974; Hill, 1996).

Capitalists were not the only ones responsible for black labor exploitation, however. Following the lead of W.E.B. DuBois (DuBois, 1932), recent scholars have dug more deeply into the psychology of "whiteness" to show the many ways in which white workers incorporated racism into their world view and used it as a means to advance themselves (Roediger, 1991, 1994; Nelson, 1996). White workers have always been part of the disfranchisement, race riots, police repression, and exclusion from unions and better jobs, housing, and education that have kept black people from advancing socially and economically. Racism came not just from the top down, but the bottom up, creating a system of divide and rule often policed by white workers themselves (DuBois, 1932; Foner, 1974; Nelson, 2000).

White supremacy placed white workers in a privileged position relative to blacks, reserving skilled jobs, education, and state subsidies for whites and prohibiting blacks from advancing. Whites organized in the crafts could gain real benefits from this, creating labor scarcity and driving wages up by keeping blacks out (Hill, 1982, 1984). Even whites in low-wage industries such as textiles, which excluded blacks except for cleaning jobs, often benefitted directly from the color line: many of them could afford to hire black domestic servants because blacks made such miserable wages and were excluded from factory jobs (Minchin, 1999; Hunter, 1997).

White supremacy, however, was in most ways a delusion for unskilled white workers. Capitalists in the South made their profits from the existence of cheap, unorganized labor, and this included the labor of whites. Many



unskilled white workers in the South made little more in wages than blacks and likewise suffered a regime of heavy work, long hours, and ruinous health and sanitary conditions. Unskilled whites could not adequately feed their families, many of them lived in run-down shanty towns, and few of them could afford to pay poll taxes in order to vote. Segregation and disfranchisement, lynch law and racial violence, all hallmarks of the southern order in the early twentieth century, created a one-party state that kept everyone but the elites poor and powerless (Honey, 1993, 1998; Lichtenstein, 1996).

### **Struggling to End Divide and Rule**

White "privilege" often meant the privilege to remain poor by refusing to organize with blacks to change the relations of class power in the South. But convincing white workers to abandon the delusions of white supremacy in favor of labor solidarity has always been difficult. This is the case not only in the South but in the North and the West, where whites fought fiercely to maintain residential, school, job, and social segregation and attacked not only African-Americans but Chinese, Japanese, Mexican Americans, Filipinos, Native Americans, and others. Racism heightened the discrimination directed at women workers of color, whom employers took the greatest advantage of and unions usually ignored (Ammott and Matthei, 1991). The racial zero sum game of capitalism, in which someone had to be a loser in order for someone else to be a winner, provided a great bulwark against solidarity unionism throughout the South and the nation (Foley, 1997; Honey, 1998; Montejano, 1987; Sugrue, 1998; Taylor, 1994; Saxton, 1971).

Many unionists, however, have understood that fighting racism and discrimination by creating a united movement was their most crucial task. Throughout southern history, labor radicals in the Knights of Labor, the Populist movement, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the Communist and Socialist parties, and in other agrarian and urban radical movements all tried to replace racism with labor solidarity. The labor Left argued that the racial system not only oppressed black people, Native Americans, and other people of color, but white working people. They called on whites to discard their color privileges in favor of a more substantive class solidarity (Foner, 1974; Green, 1980; Kelley, 1990; Honey, 1993).

Longshoremen, miners, timber workers, factory workers, and people in a variety of industries, and even the poorest of the poor, southern sharecroppers, at times successfully organized interracial organizations, under the



worst of conditions (Arnesen, 1994; Dunbar, 1981; Green, 1973, 1978, 1983; Miller, 1974; McLaurin, 1976). But southern elites used police violence, mobs, and lynching time and again to blot out these struggles. Even as industrialization destabilized the old plantation economy and opened up new possibilities for labor unity in the South, the culture of white supremacy repeatedly wrecked organizing. Segregation in effect created a police state which destroyed civil rights and liberties, including the freedom to organize, for everyone (Cell, 1982; Honey, 1993). When racism and state power combined through the segregation system, white elites gained extraordinary powers to repress unions and social movements (Roscigno and Kimble, 1995; Feldman, 1994).

Separating "black" and "white," from bathrooms to graveyards to factory time clocks, segregation claimed to prove the superiority of all whites over all blacks. But what it really did was allow an unrepresentative group of elites to control political power and make money based upon a segmented and divided working class that had neither power nor money (Kousser, 1974). In places like Memphis, this led to autocratic dictatorships that made *labor organizing extremely difficult*. Even then, black-led and interracial organizing repeatedly broke the barriers of white supremacy, opening up possibilities of social change in the South. This process accelerated dramatically in the 1930s and 1940s (Honey, 1993; Kelley, 1990; Miller, 1974).

### **Black Workers and the Revitalization of the Labor Movement: The CIO Experience**

Even though segregation helped to keep them powerless and poor, *white workers understandably had more difficulty identifying it as their enemy* than black workers, who could clearly relate their poverty and political powerlessness to the racial system. They understood that slavery had made it possible for employers to exploit their labor to the maximum, and that segregation kept them at the bottom of the wage scale. The rules of Jim Crow (segregation) kept them without access to bank loans to buy a decent house or car and without the power to challenge oppressive economic conditions at the ballot box or in a court of law. Black workers did not always know how to change Jim Crow, but they always considered it wrong (Honey, 1999).

In some cases, the only way blacks could enter industry was as strike breakers, under a hail of blows or recriminations from the same whites who would not take them into unions or allow them onto the job site. Despite



attacks from whites, when blacks had the chance to organize into unions, they usually did so (Marshall, 1967; Foner, 1974). According to one white unionist, during the 1930s African-Americans in Memphis were "a hundred times" more loyal to the CIO unions than whites, and the situation in Memphis was not unusual (Honey, 1993). Black workers constantly resisted and organized against their exploitation in a variety of ways (Hunter, 1997; Trotter, 1985, 1990; Kelley, 1994). As blacks, including black women during World War II, became a significant part of the industrial proletariat, they began to set the foundations for black community life all over the country (Jones, 1985; Trotter, 1991). The black industrial working class provided a strong base for progressive politics and became a significant force for change from the 1930s onward (Goldfield, 1997).

Black workers certainly provided the strongest base for union organizing in the South. They sometimes organized into all-black unions, but they also sought white allies when they could get them. In the 1930s, when civil rights organizations barely existed in the South, they instantly recognized that the Congress of Industrial Organizations' inclusive form of industrial unionism provided almost their only hope for salvation (Honey, 1993, 1999; Zieger, 1995; Mason, 1952). The CIO announced that it would oppose all forms of discrimination and organize all workers into one organization, at a time when older craft unions of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) still excluded blacks or organized them into powerless and separate "federal" units. In places like Memphis, where blacks made up 80 percent of the unskilled factory labor force, they became the first to join and the last to leave the CIO (Honey, 1993).

### **Shifting Perspectives on Interracial Labor Organizing**

Many CIO organizers in the South understandably tried to sidestep racial issues during the 1930s and 1940s, at a time when merely getting blacks and whites into the same room was enough to provoke a white riot or police repression. CIO organizers often tried to avoid speaking about the issue of race or doing anything about it either (Interview with Forrest Dickinson, 1983). And in the end, many CIO contracts codified discriminatory wage rates and seniority lines, and failed to challenge segregation at the work place or in the union hall (Honey, 1993, 1999; Norrell, 1986; Nelson, 1996, 2000).

Workers also created an alternative tradition, however. Highlander Folk School and progressive organizers didn't speak about racism in the



abstract, but they did take action against it. They brought people together interracially on a social and educational basis and built black and minority and female leadership which could not be ignored by whites. When whites came to Highlander, Myles Horton recalled, they had to accept eating and rooming with blacks, or go home. Highlander's curriculum and program also demonstrated the ways that interracial organizing worked (Interview with Myles Horton, 1981). Numerous white union members there and in national union conventions experienced interracial friendships for the first time, and began to rethink their support for segregation (Interview with Richard Routon, 1983).

In the deepest recesses of labor's Left, within the Communist Party, organizers went further. They constantly sought to educate white workers to the fact that resisting racism and building interracial organizations was in their own economic interests. They also taught that non-discrimination was a question of democracy and morality. They helped create a leadership group among blacks and taught white and black workers alike African-American history, and focused on the history of slavery to explain how *racism profited owners of capital, not workers*. They hammered on the ways that segregation split the working class and helped people understand that whites especially have to take the lead to fight against racism (Kelley, 1990; Honey, 1993; Painter, 1979).

Communists in the labor movement developed an anti-racist identity that guided their lives. Exemplars of this tradition included people like poor white river worker Red Davis of Memphis, who built unions and fought against racism all his life, married a black woman, and rejected his Baptist upbringing as racist. Many other examples could be cited of how both black and white workers profoundly incorporated the labor Left's anti-racism to change their lives (Honey, 1993, 1999; Rosswurm, 1992; Painter, 1979; Interviews with W.E. Davis, 1983, 1984, 1986; Ed McCrea, 1983; Karl Korstad, 1981; Lawrence McGurty, 1983).

Communists also tied non-discrimination and union organizing to a general program of attacking the larger inequalities and injustices in society. They made no separation between economic and moral goals. Communists and leftists in the United Packinghouse Workers Union, which had been destroyed by racial divisions several times over, made the cultivation of black leadership and anti-racism among whites the core of their organizing strategy. And it worked. The UPWA built and rebuilt itself, despite a shattering strike defeat in 1948, based on an aggressive policy of equal rights



and interracial organizing (Halpern, 1997; Horowitz, 1997; Halpern and Horowitz, 1996).

The CIO in the late 1930s and early 1940s, with strong leftist leadership, proved enormously successful in organizing workers. At the core of that success was the realization along a broad political spectrum that African-Americans provided a strong bedrock of support for industrial unionism, and that white workers could not succeed separate from blacks or other people of color. Most industrial unions, with notable exceptions, were less aware of the corollary necessity of gender equality, a lag that has long plagued the labor movement (Needleman, 1998). Yet a strong anti-discrimination policy within the CIO and an aggressive anti-racism among both black and white organizers was created early and proved crucial to bringing an interracial movement for social and economic justice to fruition in the era of industrial union growth (Zieger, 1991, 1996, 1997).

### **Operation Dixie: A Failed Model for Southern Organizing**

During World War II, the CIO expanded dramatically in the South, to 400,000 members, as federal agencies enforced minimum wages, union security, and minimal job rights in the region for the first time. In 1946, a coalition of unions, the interracial, left-liberal Southern Conference for Human Welfare, the socialist-led Highlander Folk School, and the CIO's Political Action Committees mapped a post-war "popular front." Their strategy sought to enfranchise African-Americans and poor whites and to extend unionization throughout the South.

As part of this plan, the CIO's "Operation Dixie" became the single largest labor organizing drive ever undertaken in the South. CIO officials pictured it not just as a struggle for trade union rights, but as a crusade against poverty, racism, and bigotry. The CIO and its allies provided the most promising vehicle ever seen for breaching the walls of segregation and fundamentally altering relations of power through a movement based in the interracial southern working class (Mason, 1952; Marshall, 1967; Griffith, 1988; Honey, 1992; Goldfield, 1993, 1997a, 1997b).

Southern businessmen and politicians instantly recognized the CIO and its organizing drive as a threat to the entire "southern way of life." Labor's use of the interracial picket line, marches, boycotts, and strikes, and its attempt to vote old-line politicians out of power set off frenzied and violent attacks against organizers all over the region. Southern Democrats had already joined with Republicans in Congress to establish a permanent House



Un-American Activities Committee in 1945, and HUAC and employer organizations unleashed a frantic propaganda barrage to convince public opinion that the CIO was subversive (*Southern Patriot*, 1945-47; Kennedy, 1946). A revived Ku Klux Klan and an agitated movement of white supremacist men likewise sought to use race riots, lynchings, and beatings to destroy any moves toward integration (Honey, 1993; O'Brien, 1999).

Responding to the greatest strike wave in U.S. history, business interests funded a right-wing upsurge of Republicans elected to Congress in 1946, including Richard Nixon. They in turn passed the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, which forced union leaders to swear they weren't Communist or lose National Labor Relations Board protections, and allowed southern states to outlaw the union shop. The law also drowned unions in legalism and paperwork. City councils in the region passed anti-union ordinances requiring organizers to have a "license" and outlawing picketing, while southern legislatures passed "right to work" laws and employers attacked every interracial organizing drive as communist. Texas lumber and oil barons funded "Christian America," probably the most well-endowed anti-union and anti-civil rights organization in the nation (Honey, 1992, 1993; Griffith, 1988).

In an atmosphere not unlike the one created by Republicans and the right wing in the 1980s, fear and demagoguery, racist violence and beatings, and firings of unionists plagued organizing in textiles, furniture, and other low-wage industries. Yet leftist union organizers had high hopes and in various locales successfully organized among the poorest workers, both black and white. The Food, Tobacco, and Agricultural Workers union (FTA) especially made advances in organizing tobacco, cotton, and food processing workers and in building an interracial union leadership across the South. The CIO also contributed greatly to the election of more progressive, pro-labor politicians such as Estes Kefauver in Tennessee, Claude Pepper in Florida, and Frank Porter Graham in North Carolina (Honey, 1992, 1993; Sullivan, 1996).

### **The Red Scare as an Instrument of Racial Division**

Despite significant grass-roots organizing by unionists, step by step the organizing leadership of Operation Dixie retreated from the CIO's progressive agenda. Eschewing interracialism, Southern Organizing Committee Director Van Bittner from the start excluded African-Americans and left wing activists from Operation Dixie, barring from the campaign those most ideologically committed to the principle of black-white unity. He hired white



organizers, almost all of them men, with the hope that they would present a conservative image to white southern workers. Bowing to the red scare, the CIO in short order cut ties with the integrationist Southern Conference. It also bowed to pressure from conservative white CIO organizers who objected to Highlander's policy of interracial education. CIO schools at Highlander ceased when it refused the CIO's demand to place an anti-communist provision in its statement of principles or keep interracial, left-led unions such as the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers union from using its premises (Adams, 1975; Honey, 1992, 1993; Interview with Myles Horton, 1981).

Both on a national level and in the South, the intensifying red-baiting campaign against the CIO succeeded in isolating the CIO from the general public. It also divided the labor movement internally. In 1949 and 1950 the CIO expelled eleven CIO unions with close to one million members, including the FTA and Mine Mill unions, mainstays of interracial southern organizing since the 1930s. The CIO now deemed them "unfit to associate with decent men and women in free democratic trade unions." In addition to expelling some of its most racially progressive and militant unions, the CIO resolved in 1949 that no individual who belonged to the Communist Party or pursued policies or conducted activities directed toward achieving the program or aims of the Communist Party, which was the most notably integrationist organization in the country, could be an elected officer of the CIO (Rosswurm, 1992; CIO, 1954).

The CIO's attacks on its member unions and organizers undermined the interracial character of CIO organizing in the South and gave credence to the segregationist charge that organizers who insisted on black-white equality were actually trying to stir up sedition and bring about communist revolution. The loss of good organizers and the attempt to project white instead of black or interracial leadership led to failure after failure, particularly in the South's leading industry, textiles, where union membership dropped from 20 percent of the industry prior to Operation Dixie to 8 percent by the early 1960s (Marshall, 1967: 259-63, 276). Black workers who wanted to organize got little help, while whites largely held back from unions. Flying squadrons of organizers who campaigned and then left garnered little support among southern workers. And rarely did the CIO connect organizing to local communities or dig in for the long haul, as veteran activists such as Myles Horton advised (Interview with Myles Horton, 1981). A disastrous period of raiding between AFL and CIO unions and within the CIO ensued, as bitter recriminations replaced analysis of the



underlying causes of the failure of southern organizing (Honey, 1992; Griffith, 1988; CIO, 1953).

Subsequently, Operation Dixie's failure and its causes became almost a secret within the labor movement. With textile unionism in decline, black and left-led unions smashed, and the bulk of southern-based industries untouched, a period of union decline in the South set in from which we have yet to recover. Not until the civil rights revolution did a new generation of militants seriously revive the interracial struggle in the South. Only this time, the struggle would be led by preachers and students, not workers (Korstad and Lichtenstein, 1988).

### **The Same Enemy, the Same Fight**

When King spoke before the national AFL-CIO in 1961, he emphasized how important unions had been to the African-American community. Because "Negroes are almost entirely a working people," they had the most to gain from a successful labor movement, and in fact provided a "bulwark for labor's whole program." Not only did African-Americans have cause to support labor, but the labor movement also had everything to gain by supporting black equality. Fully enfranchised African-Americans, in alliance with the labor movement, could organize workers, throw reactionaries out of Congress, and provide pressure on government to enact major social reforms that would benefit everyone. "If the Negro Wins, Labor Wins," he titled his speech (King, 1961).

Alternatively, King made many speeches to labor audiences in the 1960s warning that common enemies could destroy both the labor and civil rights movements. King said a growing right-wing political alliance of southern Dixiecrats, Republicans, and business interests could set back civil rights and "drive labor into impotency by viciously attacking it at every point of weakness." Through automation, industrialists would increase their profits by gutting employment for blue collar workers, undermining both unions and black earning power. Unless stopped by the labor-civil rights coalition, capitalists and the right wing together would create a labor market marked by increasing racial and economic inequality, he predicted (Honey, 1992b).

King's predictions have proven remarkably perceptive. He continued to work closely with unions which had strong black membership and leftist leadership, such as Local 1199 Hospital Workers union, District 65, and the United Packinghouse Workers union. But in his era, few other unions forged



the links necessary to bringing about a movement that could really address the problems facing African-Americans and Southern workers. To make a long story short, we have suffered from the disconnect between anti-racist and community organizing and the labor movement, while under assault from all the special interests championed by the Republican right-wing coalition ever since King's death.

King in 1968 had sought to stop this rightward drift by organizing a Poor People's Campaign uniting the working poor and the unemployed. As one step on the journey of the Poor People's Campaign, King supported a strike of black sanitation workers in Memphis, where he died on their behalf on April 4, 1968 (Honey, 1997). Organizing poor people and black workers for economic justice, King believed, was the logical next step for the movements of the 1960s. Black Workers for Justice, the North Carolina Public Service Workers Union-UE Local 150, black workers organizing at Fieldcrest Mills and other textile companies, and other groups of southern workers continue to draw inspiration from King's example today. His analysis of the causes of poverty and the need to organize continues to speak to the issues facing African-Americans and poor people (*Justice Speaks*, 1999).

While no one has simple answers for how to overcome racism and organize the working class, it seems clear that workers in the past had some things right. Many in today's multi-racial civil rights, women's, immigrant, gay rights, and labor movements understand, as King and the labor Left did in the past, that we will never organize the South unless we work constantly to break down racism, organize interracially, and support the leadership of people of color and women inside and outside of the labor movement.

### **Toward an Anti-Racist Labor Movement**

Over a tumultuous period of struggle and repression during the darkest years of Jim Crow in the 1930s and 1940s, black workers provided the backbone for CIO growth and helped to carve out an organized space for workers in the South. They were also the key to the growth of sanitation and other public employee unions during the escalating freedom movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Based on this and subsequent history, African-Americans are now the most unionized and the strongest union supporters of any social group (Yates, 1998: 107). As women, immigrants, and people of color move into the labor force in increasing numbers, they "represent a dynamic vision and direction for the entire labor movement" and are increasingly crucial to its success (Juravich and Hilgert, 1999: 29).



Developing a real labor movement or any other kind of social movement in the South is unthinkable without the leadership and energy of African-Americans, women, people of color, and others who have often been left out of the unions (Yates, 1998; Mantsios, 1998). At the same time, as in the past, white (and male) workers often still fear or resent such leadership, and employers still use fear or offer privileges as a way to wean them away from unions (Interview with Ida Leachman, 1996; Honey, 1999). Our long history of racism has created deep-seated barriers to organizing, and it won't do to say that this is a new day and a "New South." This is what conservatives like to tell us, that civil rights laws ended racism, that we now have an equal opportunity, "color blind" society. We don't have such a society, in the South or anywhere else.

What we need is not the right-center coalition of which Dr. King warned, and which dominates our political system today. Rather, we need to create the kind of strategic coalition between the poor, oppressed racial minorities, organized labor, and sympathetic academic and religious groups and individuals that King tried to build. This means that we have to acknowledge and understand the history of racism and white privilege, and take specific steps to overcome their legacies. The potential unity of freedom movements and working-class struggles still provides our strongest hope for a more just and democratic social order.

As King told striking sanitation workers in Memphis, "We can all get more, organized together, than we can apart. And this is the way we gain power" (King, 1968). It was true then, and it remains true today.

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