

The Crisis of the Black Worker, the U.S. Labor Movement, and Democracy for All

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Abstract

This paper contextualizes the socioeconomic condition of the African-American working class in the American Labor Movement. As the union movement continues its steady decline, African-American social conditions are deteriorating at an alarming pace. Racial oppression disrupted historically powerful labor movements as African-Americans served in predominantly subproletariat labor positions. As a result, Black workers endured the racially oppressive U.S. structure on the periphery of the U.S. Labor Movement. I argue that Black working-class social conditions are dialectically related to their subjugated position in the modern-day union movement. Therefore, for Black social conditions and working-class conditions to improve overall, the union movement must centralize the conditions of the Black workers.

Keywords

political economy; Black workers; labor force participation; militancy

Introduction

In August 2017, close to 6,500 autoworkers at the mile-long Nissan plant in Canton, Mississippi, voted 2,244-1,307 (63%-37%) against the United Auto Workers (UAW) claim for recognition as the employees' collective bargaining agent. From the onset of the campaign, the autoworkers suffered multiple disadvantages: Nissan's divisive three-tier employee structure made it increasingly difficult to rally solidarity around specific union goals. Nissan also spent millions of dollars in anti-union television,

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radio, and billboard advertising that emphasized veiled threats of plant closure. Surprisingly, the UAW mobilization strategy proved to be a fatal detriment.

The union rallied workers solely toward the recognition goal without designating the union victory as a vehicle to address the specific social conditions and interests of the majority black employee base. Instead, the UAW exploited racial tensions in Canton by equating the recognition campaign as the next stage in the Civil Rights Movement without any real awareness of the history of racial violence in the area. This approach allowed Nissan to prey on the black workers through a paternalistic strategy. The company seemingly conjured the spirit of George Pullman and shamed black workers for perceived ungratefulness for the “benevolence” of Nissan.

The UAW is by no means unique in how it handles racial injustice. Since its inception, the U.S. labor movement has consistently suppressed, alienated, or coopted black working-class social interests. As a result, both black workers’ conditions and the union movement have weakened considerably over time with devastating impacts on civic democracy. Black workers, more than any other segment of the U.S. working class, constitute the force with the greatest power to pressure the ownership class for legitimate social change. Without black voices and their historical embrace of political resistance, the union movement sacrifices the social capital and community power necessary to effectively challenge the ownership class and expand democracy. Until black workers construct a dialectical relationship with the labor movement, organized labor will be unable to develop the means to drive social transformation in the United States.

The tripartite apparatuses of racial oppression disproportionately dominate black workers: political subjugation, economic exploitation, and social humiliation. They are overrepresented in low-skilled positions and consistently assigned the most onerous and dirty jobs with little to no possibility of upward mobility. Their autonomy is constantly under threat; *de facto* and *de jure* laws (particularly in the South) undermine African American suffrage and protest. As was the case in the auto factories in the 1960s and 1970s, tasks performed by two white workers are often assigned to one black worker.

Outside of the workplace, southern cities like Canton, Mississippi, are still defined by apartheid policies (Mississippi just ratified the Thirteenth amendment on February 7, 2013). Throughout the 1990s, African Americans were designated to live on the Westside of the railroad tracks that split Canton into two sections. Whites lived on the affluent east side with an all-white country club. When in 1956, the Supreme Court instituted federally mandated school desegregation, the Canton white ruling class built a whites-only private school while the poorly funded public school remained fully black. Unfortunately, the UAW’s recognition campaign virtually erased Black Canton’s agency in seeking to transform their social conditions and consequently, diminished the role of union power.

The Crisis of the Black Worker

Wages are the prime indicator of how African American workers suffer from a lack of collective labor union power at a higher rate compared with their white

counterparts. According to the Economic Policy Institute, the median black worker made just 75 percent of what the equivalent white worker did in 2017, down from 80 percent in 2000. The political economy of many states and cities where black workers overwhelmingly endure racist policies and practices illustrates the severity of the issue. In Texas, for example, the racial wage disparity gap has widened at nearly twice the national pace since the turn of the century. The median wage of black workers fell to 70 percent of the wage of whites in 2017, down from 79 percent in 2000. Median hourly wages for black workers have barely budged since 2000, holding at about \$15 an hour, even as white workers' median wage rose 13 percent to \$21.67 in 2017 from \$19.14 in 2000.

Atlanta, a black majority city where its pro-growth black leadership drove down the power of unions over time, holds the worst racial inequality for black workers in the United States. Although the city is headquarters for most of the wealthiest companies in the world like Coca-Cola and Delta Airlines, it is also a hub for low-wage retail and hospitality labor. While Atlantans on average make about \$80,000 annually, black Atlantans average only \$30,000 a year with more than 80 percent of African American children living in high poverty areas in the city limits. In comparison, only 6 percent of white Atlantans live in high poverty neighborhoods (Foster and Lu 2018). With such accelerating rates of wage disparity between black and white workers, many economists forecast that by the year 2053, median wealth for black families will decline to zero dollars while the median wealth for whites will reach \$137,000 (Gould 2019).

Thus, it is appropriate to classify the fight against a livable minimum wage as a reactionary, anti-black working-class movement. Raising the federal minimum wage would incommensurately benefit black workers because they are overrepresented among low-wage workers and less likely to live in states or localities that have passed a minimum wage that is higher than the current federal minimum. For example, in 2014, the National Urban League reported that African American underemployment averaged almost 21 percent nationwide. Because Georgia remains one of the two states that has a minimum wage (\$5.15) lower than the federal minimum wage (\$7.25), the underemployment rate in Atlanta is more than likely higher than the Urban League's estimates.¹ Although African American workers have launched multiple movements for living wages, reparations, and an end to economic exploitation, the lack of support from the labor movement has restricted access to the benefits of democracy.

As a result of these social relations, African Americans make up a significantly large portion of what Karl Marx (2010) and Friedrich Engels dubbed the "Reserve Army of Labor." These workers, Marx contended, often rotate in and out of the U.S. labor force as either part-time or temporary employees. When the political economy undergoes an economic downturn, either mass layoffs expel thousands of these workers out of the class structure altogether, they no longer search for employment, or they engage in illegal capitalism (the underground economy). This disturbing trend in black employment has only worsened in the current era. As most of the jobs recovered following the 2008 Great Recession can be categorized as temporary, unstable, or

precarious, black workers in the U.S. political economy are essentially superfluous (last hired and first fired), to the labor market.

In each of the ten largest black majority cities in the United States, black residents experience unemployment that is at least five times higher than white workers. For instance, black Atlantans experience an unemployment rate of 11.5 percent compared with the white unemployment rate of 2.5 percent (Perry 2019). Thus, since the aggregate unemployment rate peaked at 10 percent for all Americans during the nadir of the Great Recession in October 2009, African Americans are currently experiencing rates of unemployment higher than the worst economic period of the twenty-first century.

Unfortunately, liberal champions of the “declining” national unemployment rate (at its lowest point in fifty years) fail to recognize two crucial elements: the national unemployment rate is “colorblind” and is “quantity over quality.” Twenty-five of the twenty-eight black majority cities with more than 65,000 residents have higher black unemployment rates than white unemployment rates. What is most stark is that in twenty of these cities, the unemployment gap is statistically significant. In major metropolitan regions like Atlanta, Newark, and Cleveland, there is an average difference of 7.1 percent and the average black unemployment rate stands at 12.11 percent (Wood, forthcoming). While the unemployment rate is heralded as an accurate picture of the social conditions of people in the United States, it only provides a partial glimpse of the percentages of people actually working.

We must also consider that the unemployment rate does not account for people who became discouraged and stopped looking for work, are incarcerated, or work in the underground economy. African Americans represent a solid portion of the people in each of these categories. Therefore, the labor force participation rate represents a more authentic depiction of racist economic outcomes in American cities. From 1980 to 2010, labor force participation rates in Atlanta, for example, were higher for white men than for black men. Between 1980 and 1990, the rate for white men increased from 71.2 to 76 percent, but the rate for black men barely increased, rising from 64 to 64.2 percent. The participation rate for black women rose from 53 percent in 1980 to 57 percent in 1990. It grew slower than that of white women, which increased from 48.7 percent in 1980 to 57.8 percent in 1990. Between 1990 and 2000, both black men and women’s labor participation rates increased to its highest levels above 75 percent; however, since 2000, their participation rates plummeted in every age group.² As it stands in Atlanta, African Americans have always trailed whites in labor force participation rate and the gap has been widening. Nationally, the black labor force participation rate has steadily declined since its peak in 2000 at 65.8 percent. The decline registered at 61.6 percent in 2016 and the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects the rate of Blacks will continue to decline even further in the 2016-2026 decade.³

Although black generational wealth inequality and debt caused by persistent racial oppression are the primary determinants of African American social conditions, the absence of black power in labor unions has aggravated racial disparities. The union pivot away from grassroots organizing depleted the voice and autonomy

of rank-and-file workers to improve their protections from employers and subsequently, reduced the democratic nature of society. Union ignorance of the fate of black workers created a working class with winners and losers. The vision of democracy worked one way for white workers and another way for nonwhite workers. Therefore, faced with a racially motivated intra-union and political disadvantage, African American workers have been left with meager resources to challenge racial subjugation, economic exploitation, and social humiliation in the workplace and society. Now, as Black Studies scholar Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua argues, African Americans are in a “New Nadir,” or the lowest point in their political, economic, and social conditions in the United States.⁴

If workers seek to restructure the union movement toward dismantling structural racial oppression, unionists must rebuild their membership ranks through community organizing. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that only 16.38 million workers were unionized in 2018, which equates to 10.5 percent of the current labor force. The year 2018 also featured workers setting a record number of work stoppages that surpassed the number of strikes in the 2007-2017 decade combined (“Union Membership [Annual] News Release” 2019; “Work Stoppages Summary” 2019). This demonstrates that unionized and nonunion workers are both striking, but wildcat strikes, or strikes without legal recognition of a union, are skyrocketing. As it stands, however, national union leadership is not attempting to reconnect with nonunion workers.

Amid the most aggressive assault on workers in decades at the federal, state, and local level, the national AFL-CIO’s leaked internal budget for 2018-2019 exposed that the labor giant dedicated less than a tenth of its \$123 million budget to organizing work, down from its highest amount of 30 percent over a decade ago. More than a third (35%) of the budget is dedicated toward political and electoral mobilization, which amounts to funding electoral candidates from both corporate political parties that pursue a “beat back China” discourse at the expense of building an international working-class solidarity against retrenchment and privatization.

For the survival of the labor movement and the health of democracy, workers must construct a dialectical relationship with the African American working-class struggle for liberation. Unions must redistribute resources toward hiring full-time local organizers that also function as community stewards. Community stewards build protest campaigns for problems plaguing working-class communities with the goal of tying worker and neighborhood struggles together. Union members must also participate in political education courses that emphasize the history of racial, class, and gender struggles in labor history. Very few union locals require members to learn how the American political-economic structure operates against workers by pitting one group against each other via social constructions. This results in workers recycling ruling-class cultural practices and policies that fracture working-class solidarity over racial identity.

Finally, to enhance democratic involvement, African American rank-and-file workers must either create political caucuses within their unions or form autonomous labor organizations outside of the official AFL-CIO structure. There is precedent for the latter. From 1919 to 1924, the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) functioned as both a

secret paramilitary group that trained black workers in armed self-defense against racial violence and an organizer of independent black unions and unorganized black working-class communities. Although they gained national prominence through their armed defense of black residents in Tulsa, Oklahoma, against a white supremacist pogrom in 1921, their ascendance in the early 1920s was primarily a response to the exclusionary practices of labor unions. Union racism either drove black workers into the capitalist camp or forced them to develop purely racial organizations, which sought purely racial aims. The ABB also educated black laborers on the racial dynamics of exploitation, resulting in the creation of a new class of black radicals who organized independent black unions in coal mines, docks, steel, textiles, and railroads (Makalani 2004, 155-58).

If the labor movement continues to neglect Black workers, then they must create their own counter movement that ultimately becomes the neo-labor movement for human rights. Half a century after the passage of the modern Civil Rights laws, it is long past time to acknowledge that unionization has not lifted the black working class to equal status with their white brothers and sisters. What then should black workers do? Waiting still longer, as Langston Hughes (1994) laments in his classic poem “Go Slow,” is not an option; “While jobless I starve to death? Am I supposed to forgive; And meekly live; Going slow, slow, slow . . .”

Both the African American community and the U.S. labor movement can grow stronger through a mutually empowering relationship. Once workers have fully investigated the relationship between the State, businesses, unions, and workers in the political economy, they will better comprehend the machinations of a democracy shaped by racism. Black workers and their unions must be willing to challenge the dominant social and cultural foundations of the U.S. political economy to revitalize the role of labor in advancing a nonracist democracy.

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Notes

1. For more on labor force participation rates in Atlanta, see “Current Population Survey from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1980-2018,” collected by The Center for Human Capital Studies of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, 2019.
2. Much of the fall in labor force participation rate can be attributed to a greater proportion of discouraged workers reeling from the recessions and loss of livable wage jobs in the city, the rise in mass incarceration, and a swelling of the sub-working class to the point that many people fall out of the class structure and enter the underground economy. Chapters 3 and 4 examine this sociohistorical shift in more depth. For more on labor force participation rates in Atlanta, see “Current Population Survey from the Bureau of Labor Statistics,

- 1980-2018,” collected by The Center for Human Capital Studies of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, 2019.
3. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, February 2018.
 4. For more on the New Nadir Theory, see Theodore Koditschek, Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, and Helen Neville (2008).

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