

# Working People's ASSEMBLIES

Social Justice Unionism  
for the 21st Century





**Working People's Assemblies:  
Social Justice Unionism for the 21st Century**



## Introduction

The labor movement in the United States has been in a crisis for several decades. The most organized sector of that movement, the trade unions, have faced shrinking numbers, density, and an offensive from both employers and government. Technological changes in the workforce have tended to transform and eliminate unionized jobs, while the dominant, individualistic culture typically found within the U.S. has been strengthened over the last 30 years. None of this is news to anyone likely to pick up and read this pamphlet.

We argue that the prolonged crisis of the movement is rooted in our past: the political weaknesses of Gompersism has hemmed us in for most of the entire history of the trade union movement in the United States. More common, but less precise terms for this conservative brand of unionism might be “business unionism” or “bread and butter unionism”. We assert that if we understand this history, the contending social justice counter-currents of our past from which we can learn, and changes in the U.S. workforce today, we have the opportunity to turn things around. Social justice unionism in the U.S. today calls for a particular politics: a recognition that trade unions are just one part of a broader working class movement that can be united to advance new forms of organizing to build regional working class power. Key to this is an ideological re-founding of the broader labor movement on social justice principles, especially the fight against white supremacy.

## Where We Are

The U.S. trade union movement, and the U.S. working class generally, face extremely difficult times. Union density (the percentage of workers legally eligible to be organized who are actually union members) is at less than 6.8% in the private sector, comparable to rates of the 1920s. The Great Financial Panic of 2008 laid bare for hundreds of millions of people the decayed nature of the capitalist world economy, and destroyed 1.4 million unionized jobs in the United States. It came on the cusp of nearly 30 years of what economists call neoliberal policies by the U.S. ruling class: privatization, free trade and deregulation of all sectors of the economy, including the labor market. (The use of “liberal” in the term neoliberal is an economic term, meaning essentially “without restraints on corporations”; not to be confused with the mainstream political concept of “liberal”) Neoliberalism challenges the very existence of unions, and paints us as an antiquated fetter on the efficient workings of the capitalist free market. Giant multi-national corporations tell us the “free market” will eventually surely take care of us all, if we just leave them alone.

Two- and three-tier wage agreements are the standard in many private industries. When workers retiring today first punched a clock in the 1970s, over 90% of private sector workers could look to a retirement supported by a traditional defined-benefit pension plan. Today fewer than 20% of retiring workers receive that. Similarly, over 70% of private sector workers had affordable health care from their employers, and the rate of health care insurance coverage for public sector health workers was even higher. Affordable health care at private employers is disappearing, and there is no help in sight from Washington on that score. Labor law, perched precariously on the Constitutional right of Congress to maintain stability in interstate commerce, has become so useless that to organize new members many unions ignore the law entirely. Beginning in the 1970s, the building trades unions were driven out of the home housing markets and retreated to a reduced existence in the largest cities. They were largely confined to federally funded projects which have legally mandated prevailing wage protection. Essentially this required union pay rates and training in this sector of the industry. This further consolidated union membership into the public sector, such that for the

first time in our history the majority of union members in the U.S. are government employees, and they have become the latest target of right wing savagery.

The value produced by the U.S. economy has doubled since 1980—but the wealth has been hoarded by the richest among us. In 1980 the top 1% controlled 10% of the country's wealth—today they control 40%. Overall, taxes are down to 15% of the value of the economy—the lowest rate in 60 years, despite the whining of the Fox News Neanderthals. While the wealthiest complain about an official tax rate of 35% for the highest earners—down from 90% in the 1950s—the tax code is so twisted to benefit the rich that the 400 richest families in the United States pay only 17% of their income in taxes. The shift of the tax burden from the wealthiest capitalists accounts almost entirely for the national debt.

The relentless political and ideological attacks on unions in the public discourse has taken its toll, although studies still indicate that if given the opportunity most workers would join a union. The verdict from our corporate mouthpieces can get a little confusing: was it autoworkers who destroyed the economy, or steelworkers? Immigrant workers? Welfare mothers? The overpaid union building trades? In their endless search for a scapegoat for their own crimes, corporate America and their conservative and liberal apologists have recently decided that it was public school teachers who ruined America after all!

The terrain faced by the next generation of workers is so different than that of their parents that it appears as a lunar landscape. It turns out that what looked normal for a few short decades to the better paid, unionized sector of the American workforce—pensions, health care, an escalating living wage, public education, the hope and expectation of a better life than their parents—was in fact a brief respite, won through struggle, from the ongoing impoverishment of the working class majority.

Beginning in the U.S. with the Reagan presidency, thirty years of corporate attacks and the current financial crisis have yet generated more than despair and suffering. Governments and social movements in the global South are pushing forward with new socialist experi-

ments. Here in the US, socialism and even more so anti-capitalism, is growing increasingly popular. A 2010 Gallup poll reported that 36% of Americans have a positive view of “socialism”. In that poll, Democrats regarded socialism and capitalism with equal favorability at 53%.

New forms of resistance and determined struggle have surfaced to challenge capital. This pamphlet is the expression of the desire of the Workers Commission of Liberation Road Socialist Organization to contribute to those new (and in some cases re-born) forms of organizing.

## **The Working Class is Our Home**

The working class is our home. In the popular post-World War II discourse, the working class officially disappeared from polite conversation. What emerged was a myth that most everybody became “middle class”—whether you were a plant manager or an electrician, custodian, assembler; a teacher or the CEO; the minimum wage clerk at the cash register. A handful of enterprising rich folks, currently known by the perverse title of “job creators”, occupied the top tier of this structure. In this myth, the “poor” are seen as undeserving, despised for living off of the giant middle class. As always in America, this nonsense was fed, and enforced, by racist and patriarchal stereotypes and myths.

But there is indeed a working class, and we are the overwhelming majority. As labor educator Michael Zweig and others have pointed out, if you define the working class as those who sell their labor and have little power over their jobs and lives, we constitute over 63% of the population.<sup>1</sup> If you include workers whose power is diminishing, such as teachers, that percentage climbs. Poverty, Zweig explains, is something that happens to working class people, not a permanent condition of a different social class of folks.

As Karl Marx said more than 150 years ago, the working class is the class with the interest to create a new world, the class that stands in opposition to the small ruling class, which can only liberate itself from wage-slavery by creating a more just, socialist society for all. Marx declared in the Communist manifesto:



“The proletarians [or workers] cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation...the proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority.”

Echoes of the Occupy movement’s definition of the 99%!

Unions remain a critical institution for defending working class power and standards of living. Union wages are higher in every case than non-union wages in the same industries (estimates range from 15% to 28%), although the “union difference” is decreasing as union density and power declines. Union members still have a better chance of having a pension, decent health care, and other benefits than non-union workers. Estimates of the union difference with wages and benefits combined range as high as 43%! The union difference is highest for workers of color, particularly women of color.

Unions remain perhaps the key element in the ongoing struggle to defend what’s left of the limited “social contract” between workers and employers since World War II: Social Security, laws that sustain minimum and living wages (like the Davis-Bacon Act in the construction industry), health and safety on the job, civil rights, and environmental regulations.

A union is formed when workers come together *as workers*. Unions contribute to building working class ties across racial and gender barriers, and contribute to a broader, class-based understanding of problems with our economy and the country. Corporate America often understands this better than some liberals who underestimate the importance of the labor movement. No matter how weak the trade union movement becomes, multinational corporations wage war on “big labor”, seeking to neutralize unions by either co-opting us into the corporate “team”, or trying to exterminate us altogether. As the fascist sympathizer President Albert Sloan of General Motors put it after World War II:

“It took fourteen years to rid this country of prohibition. It is going to take a good while to rid the country of The New Deal, but sooner or later the ax falls and we get a change.”

Even in the period from World War II to the 1970s, which most labor historians often describe as tranquil periods of labor peace and collaboration, the elemental class struggle continued on. The longest strike in U.S. history (as measured in terms of hours lost from work) by the United Steelworkers against U.S. Steel took place in 1959. The following year General Electric crushed a strike of GE workers, who had been divided and weakened by the purge of its most left-wing members

## **How We Got Here: Gomperism in the U.S. Trade Union Movement**

Trade unions have attempted to re-group in recent decades. Since President Sweeney was elected in 1995 in the first-ever contested officer elections the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)—the largest union federation in the U.S.—has taken some positive steps. In particular, it has worked to re-energize Central Labor Councils (CLCs), the organizations of AFL-CIO unions in a geographic area, after they had been ignored and undermined for more than half a century. If unions are where workers come together as workers, CLCs are where unions come together as a class, and at least potentially as a movement. The more innovative CLCs now include non-union workers organizations (such as workers' centers) as official affiliates, something hard to imagine just a few years ago.

As a result of the need for union growth, decades of internal struggle by leftists, and the growth of independent immigrant workers movements, the AFL-CIO reached out to immigrant workers, including the undocumented, after a hundred years of white-chauvinist immigrant bashing. It at least tolerated anti-war sentiment against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, although the divided Federation did nothing to build the anti-war movement other than pass a Convention resolution. The AFL-CIO dismantled most vestiges of the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), which used its operations in other countries to try to purge the left wing of the unions in every country, helped overthrow governments that threatened U.S. corporate investments, and functioned as U.S. government spies. The Federation reached out a hand to the global

justice (or “anti-globalization”) movement and sought to re-build its relationship with progressive academics and labor studies programs. The Federation immediately understood the importance of the Occupy movement last year, and supported it in an unusually respectful way.

But the U.S. trade union movement as a whole is still in the grips of Gompersism, (named after the first president of the AFL-CIO, Samuel Gompers), the conservative bread-and-butter unionism that situates itself inside the framework of capitalism. Gompersism has helped bring about our current demise and offers no hope to rejuvenate our ranks and our power. Sometimes known as American “pragmatism”, it rejects any progressive ideological or overarching political theories, and rejects building alliances based on principles. Instead it accepts the notion that we are somehow all free players in the capitalist market, and that collectively-bargained contracts for those already in unions are the only legitimate goal of the movement. Gompersism especially rejects any direct discussion of white supremacy, the Achilles heel of the U.S. labor movement. Gompersism has a cruel and disastrous history in the U.S., and to continue with it in the face of globalization and the current re-making of the U.S. working class borders on insanity.

Under Samuel Gompers, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) supported murderous imperialist adventures of the U.S. government time and again. Gompers supported the seizure of Panama from Colombia to construct the Canal, and only asked that union labor be used in its construction. He positioned the AFL as the federation of patriotic unions, as opposed to left-wing unions and socialists who opposed the slaughter of workers of all countries during World War I:

“We do not oppose....the development of our power and influence which the United States may exert upon the destinies of the nations of the earth.”

Gompers claimed that the “higher intelligence” of the U.S. [read white] workers justified U.S. wars of aggression and U.S. business exploitation all over the world. There were limits, however, to his taste for U.S. domination when it conflicted with his racism. He

rejected the notion of annexing the “semi-savage population” of the Philippines.

Courageous organizing efforts like those of the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association in the beet fields of California were refused the protection and solidarity of admission to the AFL unless they drove out their own members of Asian descent (which they refused to do). Racially white supremacist and segregated unions were included in the Federation until the 1960s, even those like the Railroad brotherhoods whose whites-only constitutions had been built on bloody pogroms against African American members. Retreating from the fight to win legal protection as human or natural rights, Gompers declared “The whole gospel of the labor movement is summed up in one phrase: freedom of contract.” Union activists learned the truth of the bitter popular saying, “when you walk in here, you leave the Constitution at the door.”

As has been the case throughout the history of this trend in the U.S. trade union movement, Gompers adopted a program of cooperation with employers that paralleled cooperation with the U.S. state abroad. The AFL signed on to the corporate “American Plan” in the early part of the 1920s, which combined the construction of “open shops” and even company unions in the guise of “Americanizing” immigrant workers. And, as usual, the U.S. unions received little in return for their ideological loyalty to capital.

The history of the U.S. labor movement at the beginning of the last century and before may seem distant and irrelevant to today’s activists. Look, then, at the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, considered the Magna Carta for American workers and still today the basic law “protecting” unions in this country. Sold as a way to restore business peace in the middle of the Great Depression, it was, like all New Deal legislation, an explicit compromise with Southern Democrats who presided over lynch law in the old Confederacy. Domestic workers and agricultural workers, who at the time encompassed most African American workers as well as Chicano/a and Filipino and Chinese workers in the West and Southwest, were excluded from coverage by the law. They still are today, three quarters of a century later!

New York's Senator Wagner, the chief architect of the new law, attempted to write into the law language that would ban discrimination on the job, but was told—by the AFL!—that if the language was not deleted the unions would kill the bill entirely. So the Black Freedom movement continued to develop, of necessity, on its own largely separate course. The anti-job discrimination language would wait 30 years, until the 1964 Civil Rights Act. “Whites only” by-laws remained in place for many AFL-CIO unions until the mid-1960s, sometimes enforced by the murder of workers of color. Even the historic black freedom March on Washington in 1963, where Martin Luther King gave his famous “I have a dream” speech and which led to the Civil Rights Act the following year, while endorsed by some unions, was not endorsed or supported by the AFL-CIO.

While the federation claimed it did not have the power to force its racist affiliated unions to open their doors to workers of color, it aggressively exercised its authority to exclude left-wing unions and leaders. The purge of communists and other militants during the Red Scare of the 1950s divided unions, wasted millions of dollars and effort in raids by right wing unions on left-wing unions, and ruined individual lives. It had the lasting effect of narrowing the debate over labor's direction, reinforcing the Gompertist anti-intellectualism in the movement that has undercut our vision and starved the discussion over strategy and tactics. Saluting the flag at union meetings and loyalty to the government became more important than loyalty to the interests of our class. The death of the even the notion of the “working class” disarmed us, and was largely unchallenged, even within the working class itself. “Operation Dixie”, the post-World War II effort to organize the South, was shut down amidst the purge of the left. Organizing the large majority of non-union workers was de-emphasized and de-funded, as unions focused exclusively on their current dues-paying members. While there was an occasional foray against out-right gangsterism in the labor movement, usually under government pressure, petty corruption and a stifling, self-perpetuating bureaucracy became the rule.

From World War II to the 1970s, the weaknesses of Gompertism were less evident, as the labor movement stagnated under a relatively stable political regime in the United States. Even a Republican like

Dwight Eisenhower (president from 1952-1960), satisfied perhaps that the more threatening elements of the labor movement were tamed, would say, “Only a fool would try to deprive working men and working women of their right to join the union of their choice.”

Wildcat strikes of Black workers against racist oppression in auto and other industries (sometimes against the union as well as the company) shattered the illusion of peace from time to time, but for the most part the purged and passive labor movement was utterly unprepared for what was to come. The accumulation and profit crisis hit U.S. corporations in the 1970s, as the rate of profit fell and capital sought new areas for profitable investment. The corporations turned on their labor “partners”, and the working class, with a renewed vengeance.

An indicator of the hold of Gompersism on the U.S. labor movement today is that the vision of even the best of our national leaders is essentially New Deal Nostalgia, a wistful appeal to a flawed compromise that contained within it the promise of its own demise—and is not about to return on its white horse in any case. Many unions still cling to a stubborn view that somehow things will change on their own, as though our history is determined by “cycles” like the business cycle. The hope is that if we just adjust to wage and benefit cuts to save our jobs, somehow things will once again go our way. “Teaming”, “competitive wages”, “jointness”, etc. mimic Gompers’s “American Plan”, and lead to the same unilateral disarmament in the class struggle.

It is impossible in a pamphlet like this to cast much light on the compromises and concessions that have been made in collective bargaining by local and international unions in recent decades. But it is absolutely clear that giving any ground whatsoever in a strategic sense is delusional. The notion that we will somehow be better served by a “modern” strategy that abandons the notion that we have different interests than corporate bosses, is disastrous, even traitorous. Bargaining and conflict take place in all circumstances—including within “teaming” schemes—because workers and corporate bosses have different interests. If there is anything that our history teaches us, it is that the only purpose of a compromise is to get ready for the next round of struggle. Behind each concession is the demand for

the next one. Class peace is temporary and relative. Class conflict is fundamental and permanent.

Gomperism advances the notion of working class conciliation to capitalists, the inevitability of a capitalist world and the impossibility of socialism. Another indicator of the hold of Gomperism in today's labor movement is the fealty of the trade union movement to the Democratic Party, which began even before Gompers. It is hard to find a union leader, including one at the national level, who isn't furious with workers' treatment by the national Democratic Party as a whole. After all, it was President Clinton, who gained office in 1992 with Democratic majorities in the House and Senate, who delivered such disasters as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the repeal of the Glass-Steagale Act, a protective measure from the New Deal which helped prevent banks from engaging in dangerous exploitative and speculative lending. Obama has continued in this capitalist mode, with free trade agreements, a compromised health care plan that left the industry in the hands of the private insurers, reduced civil rights in the name of national security, and war.

On the fundamental issues of the day, Democratic "neoliberal lite" hasn't done us many favors. Yet we continue to give hundreds of millions of dollars to the Democrats every election cycle, while our own independent structures, educational activities, and organizing funds are emaciated. For example, the Democratic Party in New Jersey receives some 30 times the funds from unions that state federations and CLCs collect from affiliated unions in their state. The Democrats build their city and ward organizations with our money. This travesty is repeated in every state and at the national level.

The problem, of course, is that the increasingly rabid Republican Party serves to make the Democrats look like a less threatening option. Today we face the possibility of national Right to Work legislation if the Republicans win control of the Senate and the Presidency, achieving what the Republican governors and legislators implemented in states like Wisconsin, Ohio and Indiana. These folks are openly racist, and continually frame their attacks on labor and the Democrats in racially coded terms. They uphold false and oppressive patriarchal notions of "True Womanhood" or are openly hateful

towards women. They claim they want to “cure” gays, lesbians and transgender brothers and sisters, while they discriminate and stir up hatred against them.

Especially at the state and local level, unions depend on local Democrats for things that matter to their members. There are examples of Democratic lawmakers who are genuine allies, in not just legislative matters but contract and organizing battles as well. But self-imposed slavish loyalty to the Democratic Party clearly is part of our current conundrum. Third-party efforts to form a labor party or other progressive third party efforts have failed, largely due to the narrow electoral system in the United States. “Fusion” voting, where the labor movement can endorse (or not endorse) candidates on their own party’s line (like the Working Families Party in New York) have at least given the labor movement some semi-independent leverage in the few states where such efforts are legal. In a more promising development, unions are experimenting with independent efforts at local electoral power-building at the municipal level, independently of the local Democratic Party.

## **Social Justice Unionism**

There are also stubborn left-wing trends in the history of the U.S. trade union movement with which we identify and which provide the inspiration for the kind of trade unionism that we need to rebuild today: **Social justice unionism**. From the beginning of the first manufacturing industries in the United States, when large-scale production of textiles and shoes replaced artisan and home production, workers recognized that the new concentration of wealth among capitalists was destroying the “Equal Rights” that they believed they were promised by the American Revolution. They organized against their employers, often with an inclusive, radical vision, and at times linking the struggle against wage-slavery with the abolitionist fight against Black slavery in the South. While in the United States this trend has usually been dominated by Gompersism and white chauvinism, it has persisted nevertheless.

Black workers were excluded from most unions of the National Labor Union led by William Sylvis after the Civil War, even though Sylvis pointed out that of the four million African Americans of the



time, “a greater proportion of them labor with their hands than can be counted from among the same number of any other people on earth”. So the ship-builder Isaac Myers build the National Colored Labor Union, organizing black workers and forging a political strategy of linking the black labor movement (and Chinese immigrant workers) with the defense of Radical Reconstruction in the post Civil War south, which had granted voting and free labor rights to African Americans in the former slave states. Efforts to bring the NCLU and the NLU together foundered over white exclusionism and white unionists’ loyalty to the white supremacist Democratic Party. As W.E.B. Dubois described it:

“As the Negroes [in the NCLU] moved from unionism toward political action, white labor in the North not only moved in the opposite direction...but also evolved the American Blindspot for the Negro and his problems. It lost interest and vital touch with Southern labor and acted as through the millions of laborers in the South did not exist.”

In a telling incident, the son of the great escaped slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass was expelled from the Washington, D.C. local of the Typographer’s Union, which meant that Lewis Douglass lost his government printing job. Upholding the action of the segregated local, the International Typographers Union claimed that admitting African Americans would cause anarchy and disintegration of the union:

“Surely no one who has the welfare of the craft at heart will seriously contend that the union of thousands of white printers should be destroyed for the purpose of granting a barren hone of membership to a few Negroes.”

The “welfare of the craft” was color-coded. This was pragmatism: morally and strategically bankrupt.

An orgy of lynching and murder consolidated white supremacy and defeated Reconstruction in the South between the 1870s and 1900. Black businesses, the churches of outspoken ministers, and schools were shuttered, confiscated and burned. In the West, non-white immigrants were scape-goated, such as when the famous Union Label

originated as an effort by the Cigar Makers International Union to drive Chinese workers from the trade.

Against the brutal repression by courts, judges, police and anti-anarchist and anti-communist political repression, workers continued to organize at the turn of the new century, but again we were divided. Skilled craft and railroad unions which excluded Black and Asian workers developed a racist approach of fighting the employers on the one hand, and fighting to defend their relatively privileged position compared to Black, Chinese and sometimes other immigrant workers on the other. These unions coalesced into the AFL, led by Samuel Gompers, chosen as president at its founding convention in 1886. Gompers founded another unsavory U.S. labor tradition by serving until he died in office in 1924.

The Knights of Labor, by contrast, organized across trades and included Black workers and Mexicans in the Southwest (but joined the AFL in excluding Chinese workers). Ida B. Wells, the great Black journalist, feminist and anti-lynching crusader of the period, attended a Knights meeting in Memphis the same year the AFL was founded, and observed: “everyone who came was welcomed, and every woman from black to white was seated with the courtesy usually extended to white ladies alone in this town.” Yet as the racist restoration of white supremacy after Reconstruction intensified, the Knights’s commitment to the inclusion of some non-white workers ended. It expelled its Mexican leaders in New Mexico who had involved the Knights with the Chicano (or Mexican-American) struggle to defend their lands from the railroads. The Knights purged suspected anarchists, and by 1894 actually called for the deportation of Black people to Africa.

The racist AFL survived and continued to grow because of the growth of the skilled trades as the U.S. industrialized, and due to its commitment to the struggle for the eight hour day. But the majority of workers in the U.S. were left at the mercy of the capitalists, until the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) again challenged the conservative U.S. labor movement with a radical, inclusive vision. When “Big Bill” Haywood, leader of the Western Federation of Miners, called the first convention of the IWW to order in Chicago on June 27, 1905, he deliberately used the words “Fellow Workers”,

as opposed to “citizens”, to indicate that the IWW’s One Big Union would include immigrants and native-born, men and women, and all races. Haywood laid out the program of the IWW in stark terms:

“We are here to confederate the workers of this country into a working-class movement in possession of the economic power, the means of life, in control of the machinery of production and distribution without regard to capitalist masters!”

Unlike the all male leadership of the AFL, the podium at that founding convention included proven leaders like Mother Jones, already a labor agitator for nearly 50 years, and Lucy Parsons, the fiery Chicago anarchist whose husband had been framed and hanged after the Haymarket bombing in Chicago in 1886. Also the IWW hired women organizers.

The IWW led historic strikes of previously unorganized immigrant workers in the textile and other industries, and at times led millions of workers, although its formal membership was probably less than a hundred thousand at any given time. When the World War I was declared, fought by competing imperialist powers to re-divide the world, the fiercely internationalist IWW opposed it and suffered jailings and deportations of much of its leadership. The repression around the war and anti-Red raids, combined with the IWW’s inability to build consistent organization inside or outside the workplace, sidelined the union as a major force in the movement in the 1920s.

The pro-war and pro-capitalist AFL was challenged again in the late 1920s and 1930s, first by the work of the Communist Party and other leftists in the South and Southwest. Armed with its new understanding—that African Americans are a distinct people with a right to self-determination, as well as overwhelmingly part of the U.S. working class—the Communist Party threw itself into organizing multi-racial unions in places like Birmingham, Alabama. There sheriff Eugene “Bull” Connor, who would become notorious for his attacks on Civil Rights demonstrators for the next two decades, led the forces of law and order against integrated unions and the left. The Communist Party helped organized sharecroppers’ unions in the South, and built the Union of Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of

America in Texas along the Rio Grande valley, and among tobacco workers in North Carolina.

The unions of the new Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), created in 1935 as an alternative to the AFL with the goal of organizing workers in the massive manufacturing industries without regard to skill or craft, included Black, Mexican and Asian workers (although sometimes in jobs that were segregated by the companies with union collusion, as in the steel industry). Millions of workers were signed up as both the CIO and the AFL grew with the formal legalization of unions by the National Labor Relations Act of 1935.

The anti-fascist nature of World War II tended to open democratic opportunities at home as well. A. Phillip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters organized the March on Washington Movement (MOWM). This was an all-black movement that threatened to organize a massive march on the U.S. capital to expose the hypocrisy of the U.S. fighting against fascism abroad while standing on segregation and the corpses of lynch victims at home. Comparing Southern Senators and foreign dictators, the MOWM declared there was “no difference between Hitler of Germany and Talmadge of Mississippi, or Tojo of Japan and Bilbo of Mississippi”. In response, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, banning discrimination in the defense industries. Both union membership and black membership within union ranks grew dramatically during World War II.

After the War the CIO launched “Operation Dixie”, a multi-union effort to pierce the anti-union and Jim Crow Southern bastion, which was recognized as holding back not just Southern blacks, but Southern whites and all workers in the entire country. The promise was to take the limited victories of the New Deal and push back still farther against the restraints on working class freedom in the country. But again, the effort stumbled against the savage white supremacy of the employers. There had been promising left-led Southern organizing like that of the Food, Tobacco and Agricultural Union (FTA) which had won 52 of 62 organizing drives up to 1946. But that was abandoned as the FTA was expelled from the CIO as a “Communist” union. Racist corporate-backed politicians and journalists warned that Joseph Stalin and race-mixing were the real issue with headlines

like: “Operation Dixie: The Iron Curtain Descends”, and “The South is Anglo-Saxon; the North is mixed races”. The fears of sexual relations between Black men and white women has consistently been woven at the core of white supremacy in the United States, used as justification for the most vicious physical assaults on African Americans. The bodies of black women, however, were considered by the white supremacists to be the rightful property of white men.

The combined offensive by the government and the Gomerist pragmatists and their liberal friends in the labor movement, along with the U.S. government’s attack on the Communist Party and other leftists as part of their Cold War competition with the Soviet Union, meant the demise of Operation Dixie and the end of the left’s ability to maintain a left pole in the labor movements. The FTA mentioned above was just one of the left-wing unions expelled from the CIO—there were fourteen (representing 1.4 million workers), in 1949. Two years earlier Congress had passed the Taft-Hartley Act which demanded loyalty pledges from union leaders and made illegal many of the tactics that had made the mass organizing of the 1930s successful, from sit-down strikes to secondary boycotts. What had promised to be a another wave of advances in the history of the U.S. working class, after the massive post-war strikes of 1946 that had class-wide, not union- specific demands (for example, pay raises for all and universal health insurance), turned out instead to be the high-water point as the tide turned backward. Many of labor’s most far-sighted leaders and of its strongest anti-racist fighters were driven from our ranks.

The post-war housing boom opened racially exclusive white tracts in the suburbs at the same time that the later years of the Great Migration brought several million Southern Black workers into Northern cities. White World War II veterans went to college, courtesy of the GI Bill of 1946, by the millions. Black veterans came home to Jim Crow and white supremacist violence in the South and segregation in the North. Union density reached its peak in 1954, and the CIO, purged of its leftists and much of its militancy, re-united with the AFL in 1955, segregated unions included. The stage was set for a period of complacency and back-sliding by the U.S. labor movement. Union leaders thought they had a seat at the table, and had become recognized “labor statesmen”. The illusion covered the decay of the

Gomperist labor movement and ill-prepared the disarmed trade unionists for the corporate attacks of the neoliberal period mentioned above.<sup>ii</sup>

## **Where We're Going: Social Justice Unionism in the 21st Century**

This short survey of the history of the trade union movement reveals that, again and again, the movement has foundered—even when it appeared to be at a point of strength—on narrow pragmatism and compromise with white supremacy and privilege. Today, this Gomperist pragmatism—“bread and butter” business unionism, pro-capitalist, and pro-war—is exhausted. It is utterly incapable of responding to successful attacks against the working class described in the first few pages of this pamphlet: the rollback of workers’ rights, wages and working conditions. It is certainly unable to deal with the ecological disaster facing us, brought on in part by unions buying into perpetual growth as the key to improvement, or for real democracy where the working class, not the capitalist class calls the tune.

In contrast to Gomperism, what we in Liberation Road call “social justice unionism” has a program that is in line with the actual challenges facing our movement. We prefer the term “social justice,” rather than “social movement” unionism to emphasize political principles as opposed to simply militant tactics. As is usual in our history, Social Justice Unionism is a minority trend in our movement today but it is digging in, building alliances, struggle and new forms of organization. In *Solidarity Divided*, Bill Fletcher, Jr. and Fernando Gapsin review the above history and more, and sketch out a review of actually-existing Social Justice Unionism as it is being built on the ground.<sup>iii</sup>

Social justice unionism has to include a cultural transformation of our unions. Taking our cues from Ella Baker and her extraordinary commitment to and success in developing leaders in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Mississippi in the early 1960s, we sometimes use the term, “Leadership Development Unionism” to describe our methods of organizing.

As we mentioned earlier, union leaders seem to spend an inordinate amount of time figuring out how to stay in office, and preferably, die in office. In our view of leadership development, the goal of a union leader is to make himself or herself replaceable. The essential task of leadership is to find ways for members to make contributions, to learn, to feel positive about that contribution, and to come back for more. We need a culture in the labor movement where the highest praise you can offer an active trade unionist is that he or she got someone involved, inspired someone, welcomed someone and help develop them into leaders. This method works. There are people in your union right now who have these skills. Very likely many of them are women.

Leadership Development Unionism is neither a luxury we cannot afford, nor a “soft skill” brought to us from a consciousness-raising group. It is an upfront investment that pays off a thousand-fold down the road. It is necessary if the labor movement is to meet the challenges of this period. If we don’t change the culture of the movement, we drive away our one essential “resource”—our people.

Social justice unionism in the 21st century is developing, in part, because of changes in the composition of the working class in the United States. This has been called the “rise of the New Working Class”. A massive migration of new immigrants from Central America, the Caribbean, Asia and increasingly Africa has located millions of new workers of color alongside African Americans who already resided in urban cores across the country. Increasingly, the influx of new workers has spread to the rural Midwest and Southeast as well. Reduced union density, the narrow focus of most unions on retaining their upper sector working class base, President Clinton’s “end of welfare as we know it”, and the general impoverishment of the working class have all contributed to the worsening condition of this growing sector. This growing sector is concentrated in urban and inner-ring suburban areas already occupied by large African American populations, and comprised disproportionately of women of color. These workers are concentrated in the hospitality industry, low-wage manufacturing such as textiles, food and other light industry, retail, security, and personal services, and in the burgeoning “social reproduction” industries, such as formal and informal sector

cooking, cleaning, healthcare, childcare, elder care, etc. Despite the efforts of a few unions to organize in some of these sectors (notably UNITE HERE and SEIU), the rate of unionization for these workers remains low or non-existent. These workers struggle with barely-subsistence level wages and the worst working conditions of any workers in the United States.

At the same time, these workers are at the fulcrum of the neoliberal assault on the “social wage”—that is, the wide array of benefits that make life livable: pensions, health insurance, childcare assistance, public education, unemployment insurance, safe streets, city parks and recreation facilities, etc. Thus these workers are in a daily struggle on two fronts, an overlapping battlefield at the workplace and in the community.

The fact that this growing sector of the working class is situated at the fulcrum of the fight to defend the social wage indicates the key importance of the public sector unions in this period. Public sector unions serve both their members and the public, including providing the hard work that delivers all the elements of the social wage noted above. African American workers in particular gained large-scale employment in the public sector beginning in the 1960s. The Black Freedom Movement broke down discriminatory barriers at the same time public sector workers were organizing unions in large numbers for the first time. As Liberation Road has an additional pamphlet on the fight to defend the public sector, please see *In Defense of Public Sector Services and Workers* for a more in-depth exploration of this topic.

Neglected by most traditional unions, these workers have organized non-union working class organizations for their defense. While some are especially vulnerable because they are among the 12 million undocumented workers among the U.S. working class, the strength of organizing traditions among and discrimination against immigrant workers and African American workers has driven the organizing process forward. These new organizations have many roots—some are faith-based, some organize around a workplace or a particular type of employment such as day-laborers, some focus on the fore-closure crisis, and yet others are based in particular neighborhoods.



These “New Working Class Organizations,” whether job-oriented or not, are an increasingly important part of the labor movement today.

They are typically positioned on the left wing of the politics of community organizing, long dominated by the Saul Alinsky-inspired Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) culture of organizing. Reformist urban organizers have had success in certain areas, such as living wage ordinances—municipal laws which require employers, especially those that do business with the city, to pay a “living” wage that is above the minimum wage.

But as the Center for Third World Organizing and a host of leftist Workers Centers have noted, IAF-inspired groups carve a “non-ideological” path remarkably parallel to the Gompertist trend in the trade union movement. They intentionally avoid directly challenging white supremacy, and make little or no effort to unearth the class relations that underlie exploitation and contribute to racist and patriarchal oppression in the United States. “Organizing” becomes a series of escalating civic actions that result in a negotiated settlement that more often than not reinforce existing class, race and sexual domination. One reason that modern union “pragmatists” so closely mirror the work of the Alinsky-style community organizations is that many of today’s union organizers and some of our leaders were trained by these community organizing groups.

Unions in the U.S. tend to operate in a manner similar to corporations—with a wholesale focus on protecting their narrow institutional interests. For example, in New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo successfully broke the solidarity of the New York union movement by offering needed jobs to the building trades with the money saved by eliminating public sector work. Fundamental notions of working class solidarity gave way to the interests of a particular union and its members. On the other hand, when in Wisconsin the police and firefighters were asked to support Governor Scott Walker’s proposed draconian legislation that would bust other public sector unions while exempting their own unions they said they would rather stand together with their union brothers and sisters than to support a tyrant like Walker.<sup>iv</sup> Building this kind of solidarity requires a fundamental struggle for unions to expand their vision of what they represent: instead of a narrow focus only the interest of their dues

paying members, unions must exercise international class solidarity. As argued in *Solidarity Divided*, unions must think and act in ways both local and global. They have to embrace the whole interest of the working class and not just those interests of their members.

In this context, even traditional employment-based union organizing itself becomes a product of the alliance of trade unions and whole communities. Building working class power becomes the goal, whether in a struggle for a collective bargaining agreement or seizing political leadership of a municipality. The Wisconsin uprising was an example, but so did the International Longshore Warehouse Union's (ILWU) militant battle in Longview, Washington. That struggle highlights how a "communities of solidarity", in this case built by Portland Jobs with Justice, the Occupy Wall Street Movement and an internationalist class struggle union culture, can achieve victory despite all-out opposition from the corporations, the law, the courts and the police.

There is now nearly a two decade history of unions trying to crawl out of the narrow frame of Gomperism to develop various forms of "community-labor alliances", and considerable progress has been made. Union Cities, the program for CLCs initiated in 1996 by the AFL-CIO encouraged CLCs to build alliances with community organizations is an example. Serious efforts were made to go beyond the "call a collar" tactic of calling on sympathetic clergy to side with unions during a contract or organizing campaign without providing reciprocal union support, and without relationships being built at the base of the respective organizations.

Recently more stable "deep coalition" relationships between progressive local unions, CLCs and community partners have been established in "regional power-building" efforts, often allied with associations such as Working Partnerships USA. Members of the building trades unions, especially the non-licensed crafts like the Painters and the Carpenters, have in some areas developed aggressive outreach and organizing efforts to immigrant workers, and partnerships with immigrant-based Workers Centers. The Amalgamated Transit Union, under new leadership, has developed innovative organizing partnerships with Riders Unions and other community groups in defense of public transportation as a public good, not just as a provider

of good jobs for their members. UNITE HERE is engaging in non-partisan, labor-based electoral work in several cities. As mentioned above, a few CLCs already invite workers centers or other non-traditional working class groups such as Taxi Drivers associations or day laborer groups to affiliate as members of the Councils.

On the “community” side of the equation, Right to the City-affiliated coalitions challenge the dominant economic development paradigms in the major cities, which often drive poorer working class people out of the newly desirable central cities so that “yuppification” can take hold. The Right to the City folks also specifically attempt to develop “counter-hegemonic” projects and cultures, designed to challenge the dominant “common sense” of our times, from racism to notions of who really creates wealth. We owe a great deal of our understanding of these concepts to the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci.

We are calling for the next generation of community labor alliances: **the permanent construction of a social bloc of working class organizations in a municipality or region, built on an upward spiral of political consciousness and education, to actively contend for power with the capitalists and their politicians**—a “working people’s assembly”, to use a concept introduced in *Solidarity Divided*.

These blocs create *communities of solidarity* based on mutual respect and common strategic interests, built up over time, with an ideological foundation explicitly based on class struggle, opposition to patriarchal and white supremacist practices, fighting for the environment and rock-solid working class unity. Clearly, in a working class that is so heavily influenced by white supremacy, patriarchal ideology and anti-immigrant and homophobic prejudices, this kind of effort will require mass political education as a foundation of the project. To borrow another contribution from Antonio Gramsci, this is a strategy for non-revolutionary periods, while engaged in a “war of position”—where the working class can gradually build its forces during a period of capitalist domination.

As mentioned above, these working class coalitions may have an electoral aspect, especially in local elections, although they are not primarily electoral efforts. They will go beyond efforts to influence

a particular development and do their own research on the local economy leading to proposals from the coalitions themselves: from “community benefit agreements” that force developers to contribute to local, community-controlled hiring, training and social investment, to revisiting the long tradition in the U.S. of creating worker-owned businesses, or cooperatives.

The trend toward cooperatives is gaining increasing attention as local activists take responsibility for creative approaches to economic development—sometimes referred to as the “solidarity economy”—in large urban areas largely abandoned by the so-called “job creators”. The recent alliance between the United Steelworkers of America (USW) and the Mondragon cooperatives in the Basque area of Spain is an indication of this trend. Unionized and more explicitly left-wing cooperatives of the Bologna area, situated in Italy’s historic “Red Belt”, may also be instructive. From the perspective of a social bloc contending for working class power, the goal is not only to create a handful of decent jobs, but to expand our institutional power and organizing base. A network of worker-owned cooperatives can be part of the power-building effort.

## **Conclusion**

We focus on the challenge and promise of Social Justice Unionism in this century, and in particular the opportunity to overcome the historic failure of the U.S. trade union movement to consistently challenge white supremacy, by building permanent alliances between unions and New Working Class Organizations in urban areas to contend for working class power. However, we do not mean to say that this is the only comprehensive program for the labor movement.

The reform of local unions through the use of Leadership Development Unionism and building progressive left-led coalitions within unions are also important aspects of our work. In fact, it is hard to imagine building either strong labor councils or strategic alliances with New Working Class Organizations effectively without strong, left-led local unions from which to build. The effort to transform local unions may involve oppositional reform caucuses, and will certainly involve internal education campaigns, efforts to increase and focus organizing, and creative and militant collective bargaining

strategies. There is abundant literature available which discuss these strategies in depth, available from progressive labor journals such as Labor Notes, and books such as *Solidarity Divided*.

We work night and day to transform our local unions into fighting, class-conscious organizations. While good union staff are crucial to success, they are usually at the mercy of elected officials, and their work is often constricted by the politics of their local and international unions. We encourage progressive and left-wing union members to engage as rank-and-file members, becoming local leaders in the long haul of building a base in their unions and moving their organizations to the left.

We live in the reform struggles, often in defensive battles during at this point in history, every day. But as we fight, we strive to always do three things:

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- 1. Win as much as possible and weaken the enemy through collective and militant action;**
  - 2. Spread class consciousness and build the unity of the working class through education and organization;**
  - 3. Recruit people to socialism by promoting international solidarity, agitating against capitalism, studying, and providing a program to build an alternative world.**
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In other words, we do what Karl Marx called for in the Communist Manifesto:

“In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, [communists] always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.”

## About Us

Liberation Road Socialist Organization/El Camino para la Liberación members are working class people and people of all races and gender identities. We are both veteran comrades who have 30 to 50 years in the trade union movement, and young people who recently joined our revolutionary movement through Workers Centers, or just began to work. We take pride in the fact that Liberation Road members in the trade union and New Working Class Organizations work respectfully with other socialists, progressive activists and all others in a non-sectarian way, seeking to learn, share lessons from victories and defeats, and humbly contribute to building the left wing of the labor movement. We also work with other socialists, revolutionaries, revolutionary nationalists and leaders of social movements to create a revolutionary party in the United States, a process we call “Left Refoundation.” See our pamphlet *Which Way is Left? Theory, Politics, Organization and 21st-Century Socialism* for more on this topic.

As we stated in our introduction, these are tough times for workers in the U.S. This is the hand we have been dealt, and there is no other. But our class has been on the defensive for most of its existence. We are optimistic that we have an opportunity at this particular point in history, based on the actual nature of the history, class structure and struggle in the U.S. today, to overcome past weaknesses to create a new, stronger labor movement set on a revolutionary course. We believe the creation of class-conscious coalitions/assemblies with unions and New Working Class Organizations united at their core, is a key way to proceed with this task.

Join us to build Social Justice Unionism in the United States, to build progressive New Working Class Organizations among oppressed sectors of our class, bring them together in communities of solidarity, and build the socialist current among working class people.

To contact Liberation Road, or for copies of Liberation Road publications mentioned in this piece, contact us at: [www.liberationroad.org](http://www.liberationroad.org).

# Notes



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