

Introduction

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By the end of the decade, the fatal shooting of a twenty-two-year-old black man, Daniel Bell, as he ran from white officers, was among policing-related incidents that escalated racial tensions.

—Milwaukee, 1958 as summarized by Tula Connell, this volume

The 2014 police killing of black college bound teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, involved two union members: the police officer and the mother of the victim, a member of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 88. This special issue on *Labor and Racial Justice* offers a critical examination of the role and responsibility of workers and labor unions in constructing racist hierarchies and in dismantling them to create more just, fair, and equitable systems. AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka stated, “Racism is part of our inheritance as Americans,” and this special issue wrestles with key dimensions of its living legacies. The call for papers invited scholarship on projects, initiatives, and campaigns that explored the complex realities of labor’s twin impulses of perpetuating racism and propelling justice. Collectively, the articles capture how labor’s dualities emanate from different actors and varied locations. They bring specificity to the circumstances and players that prod systems to change.

The 2016 conference theme—and by extension, this special journal issue—is a testimony to the advocacy and foresight of Elise Bryant. Her decades of unwavering commitment to educate at the intersections of race, labor, and the arts are remarkable. Inspired by the excitement present at the widely attended *#BlackLivesMatter*¹ panel organized by University of California–Berkeley’s Steven Pitts at the 2015 United Association of Labor Educators conference, Elise argued it was fitting and timely to focus the next conference on labor and racial justice. Rather than a stand-alone spotlight, we hope this special issue encourages mainstream labor scholarship and convenings to integrate a complex racial justice analysis as a core lens.

Each article furnishes an in-depth analysis that deftly blends history, sociology, and politics with community actors and national trends from 1860 to 1960. Combined, they furnish a solid history of the construction of key socio-economic structures and invite reflection on labor’s role in the past, present, and future of this evolving democracy. Cedric de Leon asks provocatively, “Why did civil and labor rights become decoupled?” He delivers a surprising answer rooted in Civil War politics that traces the unravelling of an agenda where Radical Republicans pursued *both* Reconstruction and the eight-hour day. Venise Wagner and Tula Connell study Chicago and Milwaukee,

respectively, during the Great Migration of African Americans to the north after World War II. Wagner uses bankruptcy records of black steelworkers in Chicago to paint a robust picture of worker lives and delivers an account of the bittersweet role of a union job in their economic trajectory. Connell's examination of black civic life in Milwaukee examines grassroots political agency. She finds that the strategies pursued reflected different class positions and ideologies within the black community. Each analysis is rooted in a mid-west city—two in Chicago (de Leon and Wagner) and one in Milwaukee (Connell). The local dimension conveys the lived realities for communities while capturing national dynamics.

These historical analyses starkly demonstrate that a good job is not enough to save black lives. All three papers capture how class and income intertwine with race, gender, and ideology to create differential trajectories of opportunity and exploitation. Income and earnings are embedded in social relations and layered with politics, history, and social status. As such, money alone does not determine outcomes. In illuminating the construction of these institutions, the authors show the violence of systemic discrimination. Both Connell and Wagner find the hyper-segregation of black communities an inescapable limiting condition. A major driving force then and now is redlining, where banks refuse to grant mortgages to racially mixed and minority neighborhoods. Wagner vividly conveys how a regular paycheck from a union job to a black male breadwinner is a blessing, but its benefits are quickly undermined by job discrimination characterized by low wages in the most dangerous jobs, with no pathways to promotion, and junior status in the seniority system. In addition, neighborhood segregation that led to overpriced substandard apartments and homes, poor schools, and expensive loans to finance cars, furniture, and clothes sapped the meager resources of black workers. Connell shows how efforts to partner with employers, unions, and politicians to end job and housing discrimination were consistently thwarted, even when the black middle class sought to vet and send only the "most qualified" candidates. Many of these dislocations and exclusions, de Leon argues, can be traced to unions and political parties bifurcating class and race. As a result, New Deal policies served the needs of the white working class, while African Americans obtained a federal response three decades later with President Johnson's Great Society programs.

Each author's larger academic project deeply animates their individual paper. As a former union organizer and local president, de Leon was perturbed by the political dynamics that flipped Wisconsin and Michigan from union strongholds into Right to Work states. Now a college professor, he deploys the tools of historical sociology to unearth the roots of this ideology. For a full discussion of this history, see his 2015 book, *The Origins of Right to Work: Antilabor Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Chicago*. As a professional journalist turned academic, Venise Wagner's scholarship and pedagogy fosters new approaches to reporting that counter stereotypes and the emphasis on individualism. Her current book project, *Tracking Opportunity*, explores how journalists can better cover stories of disparity to account for the ways those structures of opportunity shape life paths. Tula Connell's book, *Conservative Counterrevolution: Challenging Liberalism in 1950s Milwaukee* (2016), starkly reminds us that a vigorous opposition is almost always present. As such, local

grassroots agency is necessary and critical—but not sufficient—to secure enduring shifts in the structures of justice.

From the Civil War to the New Deal to the Great Society to the Black Lives Matter movement, the authors demonstrate that the fate of workers and this country are deeply intertwined with the fate of African Americans and other marginalized groups. The call for papers invited multi-racial analysis because a racial justice analysis recognizes that any group can be racialized to define categories of worth and to justify dominance and exploitation. Asian, Latino, and Native American histories enrich our understanding of how class is lived and chronicle how the processes of racialization and commodification morph and adapt in order to endure. Each author provides evidence of a diverse racial reality but their central problematic is the black/white divide. All three authors illuminate how the European immigrant struggle to become “white” fueled violent social distancing from blacks. Cedric de Leon recognizes that class and race were fused, noting that “race shaped white workers’ conceptions of class identity” as they struggled mightily to avoid the fate of becoming “wage slaves” in an industrial economy. The home values and good schools of the suburbs exist only through a system of racial segregation. As such, the so-called progress of one group is deeply dependent on the subordination of other groups. As the Black Labor Scholars Network argues, close attention to the African American experience is critical to the labor movement as a whole because blacks are often the “canaries in the coal mine” who are the first to experience the trends and crisis that will eventually befall us all.

As police violence against black men and women continues relentlessly, these articles are a stark reminder that economic exploitation and neglect lay at the heart of race and policing. They illuminate the contemporary moment by revealing how the legacies of the past drive the confrontations between police and communities that we see today. The crushing impact of the past on the present leads Cedric de Leon to frame his Civil War history as a way to understand why Black Lives Matter activists boldly confronted Bernie Sanders at a 2016 Seattle event to pressure progressives to pay attention to race. From January to September 2016, Chicago was home to almost three thousand shootings concentrated nearly exclusively in poor and working-class majority black neighborhoods. One recent study estimates that it would take 228 years for a black family to accrue the wealth of an average white family. Wagner conveys how the pursuit of housing and homeownership by African Americans too often led to the “disaccumulation” of assets where equity and resources were sucked out of the community through a racist housing market and manipulative financing schemes. A similar dynamic drove the 2008 housing crisis with the same devastating impact on the assets and aspirations of many homeowners. Connell conveys the enduring legacy of past decisions when she reports that *Business Insider* ranked Milwaukee as one of the most racially segregated cities in 2013, and a 2015 research study ranked it the third most segregated city. In addition, National Public Radio recently profiled it as one of the worst cities for African Americans.

These authors document the roadblocks blacks faced in their efforts to leverage the union as an agent of change on their behalf. In all cases, labor was an unreliable ally. Sometimes it was a partner. Other times it was the target of advocacy. Cedric de Leon

concludes that unions, third parties, and other organizations sought “to fulfill the unrequited ambitions of the white working class exclusively, instead of building a movement that included the struggles of all marginalized working people including people of color and women.” Wagner and Connell identify specific committees, persons, and strategies that sought change and often met disappointment. Today, labor’s shrinking footprint has led to calls for change that includes reckoning with the intersection of racial and worker justice, instead of a colorblind classism and universalist progressivism. Recently, the AFL-CIO and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) created racial justice committees and have called for building alliances with other movements. Connell’s and Wagner’s histories reveal that in the past, similar committees achieved successful working partnerships with external civil rights organizations, like the National Urban League and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). However, these committees often failed to address the union’s own racist practices or the employer’s discriminatory behavior. Lawsuits proved the most effective way for minorities to obtain changes in union and employer behaviors.

Despite shortcomings, public sector and other unions have been the pathway for many minority, female, and white male workers to obtain financial security critical to family stability. For those ill-served by labor’s blind spots, they had to rely on informal labor and the supplemental income of spouses and children to off-set their precariousness and ensure the family’s survival. Unfortunately, the industrial era victories of the eight-hour day and the weekend respite from the workplace are losing their potency in a world of 24/7 technological access and an emerging gig/sharing/social media economy. The fight for a \$15 minimum wage is one part of a renewed social contract for workers. But for de Leon, the legacy of white-only working-class institutions must be broken. He fears that “today, as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, social movements for labor, civil, and immigrant rights, are not mutually reinforcing, allied constituencies exerting combined upward pressure on the political establishment to rethink these struggles as linked.” Strong alliances and shared vision are needed to collectively reconstruct our social, economic, and public institutions in order to contend with climate change, migration, aging baby boomers, and multiple wars. When the time arrives to “re-write the rules,” can unions and their allies be a force for doing so without relying on racist, sexist, classist, Islamophobic, homophobic, or transphobic hierarchies? To bring about a transformational change will require contending with the internal politics of unions. As unions contend with their own racial histories as well as how to respond to industry and economic change, new social movements and alt-labor offer bold approaches that are intersectional and multi-racial. They blend the universal and the particular in their vision of change. For powerful examples, see the Black Lives Matter 2016 policy platform or the Black Youth Project 100 “Workers’ Bill of Rights” that demonstrates the marriage of labor justice and racial justice analysis.

The papers in this special issue vividly show that the march toward justice is not inevitable. The hard work of advocacy, organizing, and activism pulls the arc of history toward justice. The legacies of labor’s twin impulses of liberation and oppression

reflect the promise and peril of labor. Armed with this knowledge, we are better able to construct a new system whose vibrancy is based on solidarity, collaboration, and justice. This special issue contributes to that effort.

Black Youth Project 100 Agenda to Build Black Futures

Workers' Bill of Rights

1. All workers should receive a living wage (regardless of education/experience).
2. All workers should have access to provisions for maternity/paternity/parental leave.
3. All workers should have paid sick leave.
4. All workers should have the right to form a union and/or body for the purposes of collective bargaining for benefits, wage adjustments, sexual harassment, grievances, and workplace safety.
5. All workers should have protections against discrimination based on perceived or self-identified gender presentation and sexual orientation.
6. All workers should have protections against discrimination based on past drug offenses or incarceration.
7. All gender-based and race-based pay gaps should be eliminated in public and private places of employment.
8. All adults who want a job should have a right to employment through public or private opportunities through a federal jobs program.
9. All children, regardless of the financial status the child was born into, should receive a Child Development Account or "baby bond."
10. All people have a right to a guaranteed living income regardless of employment status.

Note

1. Full panel title is "#BlackLivesMatter: The Upsurge in Black Activism, the Black Job Crisis and the Role of Labor Education in Helping Unions Deal With This Moment."

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