

THE BLACK LABOR COLLABORATIVE

A Future for Workers: A Contribution from Black Labor

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Future for Workers: A Contribution from Black Labor is a paper that offers a perspective that is timely and unique, blunt but hopeful, progressive yet tempered by the grotesque grip on wealth and power by global elites. It speaks in the voice of nearly 2.1 million African Americans in labor unions.

This document seeks to advance a discussion that is so badly needed. What is it that workers need and want? How can this then become not the “special interests” of an isolated labor movement, but a robust agenda that can rally the bottom 99% to collective action? These questions anchor the analyses, conclusions and recommendations presented in this paper from a black labor perspective.

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A Future for Workers: A Contribution from Black Labor comprises three sections. The first one makes a strong case for a “transformed labor movement,” something capable of fighting and making the cause of workers also the cause of the 99%. Nothing less will be sufficient to challenge the juggernaut of global capitalism, whose only allegiance is to profits and more profits.

As the insecurities of the ruling elite have mounted, dangerous forms of authoritarian politics also have expanded – lethal police attacks on unarmed black people; suppression of the right to vote of African Americans, Latinos, youth and senior citizens; the narrowing of dissenting views in mainstream media. Clearly, there is a growing view on the political Right that the “wrong people” are participating in this democracy at this time.

A recurrent theme in *A Future for Workers: A Contribution from Black Labor* is the role of race in the tumble of the American labor movement and the centrality of racial justice in any revival of organized labor. As the paper notes, “Black workers have been, for the working class as a whole, the canary in the mine...What befalls the Black worker inevitably confronts the bulk of the working class.” But the Achilles’ heel of organized labor has been its failure to respond to attacks on black workers and its inability “to recognize that the Black working class is, indeed, a component of the larger working class and not some marginal category.”

Witness the silence by most of labor to racialized attacks on social safety net programs that protect the poor but were won initially as worker protections during the New Deal. That silence in not protecting the poor also meant silence in addressing the worsening plight of black workers.

- For the past *50 years*, the unemployment rate for African American workers has been at least double that of their white counterparts.
- At its lowest point, when white male median earnings dropped to \$37,000 in 1981, it was still higher than the peak median earnings of \$34,118 that black men reached in 2006 -- *25 years later*.
- The wealth of white households was 13 times the median wealth of black households in 2013, compared to eight times black household wealth in 2010 – an astounding *50 percent jump in only three years*.

Such entrenched disparities (even worse for black women) have given rise to divergent views of the economy. From the black perspective, the jobs crisis and persistent low-wages are the crux of the economic calamity strangling black communities. For millions of white workers, however, the rising economic tide, even if late and unsteady, did eventually lift their boats, though they still might not have recovered all the way.

But the reality is that the pie is shrinking for workers in general. The reality is that the richest 1% of the population will soon own more wealth than the entire rest of the world's population. The reality is that we are running out time to stop the poverty and inequality cycle and to restore hope among people flipping burgers or surviving on the margin in our big cities and small towns.

Put bluntly, U.S. workers urgently need a new and differently functioning labor movement. The foe we face, in the political Right and global capitalism, demands a transformed and energized labor movement that can fight back with more than slogans of solidarity. No tinkering around the edges! A transformed movement must be inclusive because diversity carries the seeds of change, of untapped creativity.

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The second section of *A Future for Workers: A Contribution from Black Labor* outlines the contours of an agenda that focuses on power rather than on grievances. It is put forth here *only* as a progressive approach to shaping an agenda that would emerge later through discussions among workers, their unions and their communities about the needs of working people.

Here is a preview of some of the major recommendations:

Jobs and Economic Development

- A firm societal commitment to creating a full-employment economy
- Implement the Robin Hood Tax (a .5% tax on Wall Street transactions)
- Elimination of discriminatory gaps in black and white unemployment rates
- Income support for students to focus on their education not loan debt

- Movement toward a progressive system of taxation based on wealth and income
- Government support for worker cooperatives
- Attack predatory lending
- Provide more government-supported financing for home buyers
- Attack vigorously housing segregation

Environment

- Take immediate steps to cut fossil fuel emissions
- Fully fund the transition of workers and worker organizations out of the fossil fuel industry
- End fracking
- Address the disproportionate burden on communities of color of the environmental crisis
- Desist from dumping waste from developed economies in the global North into vulnerable countries in the global South
- Support family farms instead of corporate agriculture

Criminal Justice

- Educate Don't Incarcerate!
- Reduce incarceration levels by mediation, drug courts, etc.
- Decriminalize drug use
- Support job programs targeted to returning citizens
- Address sentencing disparities
- Increase accountability of police to communities through civilian review boards
- Desegregate all levels of law enforcement, including prosecutor's offices

Distribution of Wealth

- Adopt progressive income tax rates that target wealth and income
- Require banks and other lending entities to compensate victims of the 2007/2008 economic collapse, especially communities of color
- Adopt a 21st century "Marshall Plan" with a new urban strategy to rebuild communities of color and prevent the mass displacement of low-income residents
- Raise the wages of low-income workers to livable rates, especially in occupations dominated by women, like health support, caretaking, fast food, retail, child care, etc.
- Expand affordable child care and after-school programs for working parents

Education

- Guarantee the right to a *free* quality education (K-12), and through four years of undergraduate education
- End the war against teachers
- Reduce class sizes

- Increase resources for public colleges, especially Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's)
- Provide bi-lingual education whenever requested or wherever needed

Tolerance and Equity

- Support just immigration polices that reconnect families and provide equitable and fair means to migrate
- Engage in a genuine national dialogue on race and racism
- Support meaningful affirmative action measures to redress historic disparities based on race, gender ethnicity
- Fully fund and empower government agencies that monitor discriminatory practices and enforce civil rights
- Fully back the enforcement of statues that protect the rights of the LGBTQ community

Labor Movement

- Commit to organizing service and low-wage jobs that are the fastest growing employment sector and overrepresented by women and people of color, who are more likely to join a union
- Organize workers in the South and in right-to-work states
- Ensure union leadership and staff reflect the demographics of the membership and the workers targeted in an organizing campaign
- Inject organizers into community organizing campaigns
- Endorse political candidates with a 90-100% labor voting record **ONLY**

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The closing section of *A Future for Workers: A Contribution from Black Labor* is a plea to all trade unionists to seize the moment. We should not see our task as simply re-inflating a slow-leaking tire. We need a new tire.

A transformed, energized labor movement must be authentically inclusive, something that workers see as *their* instrument for justice and equity. Moreover, our trade union movement must align itself with a broader labor movement that is welcoming janitors as well as adjunct professors (Fight for 15).

Above all, it is totally not acceptable for our movement to debate and adopt an agenda and then adjourn. The final version of a workers agenda must be a *living document*. A blueprint that guides and is guided by the ongoing efforts of workers to create a humane, sustainable future worthy of their sacrifices and the hopes of the next generation.

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To read the full BLC report, visit www.cbtu.org

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