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Unions

Black Labor Leaders' Report Calls For Inclusive New Labor Movement

A coalition of black labor leaders published a report July 28 outlining a roadmap for an “energized,” inclusive U.S. labor movement.

The report, “A Future for Workers: A Contribution from Black Labor,” was authored by the Black Labor Collaborative, which comprises black leaders at organizations such as the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, AFL-CIO, Service Employees International Union, and A. Philip Randolph Institute.

The report addresses racial disparities in unemployment and wages, among other areas, and offers a series of recommendations for a “transformed labor movement.”

The authors discuss ways of improving conditions for the nation’s workforce, including using government-backed employment training programs; moving toward a “progressive” tax structure based on wealth and income; raising minimum wages; and offering free “quality education” from kindergarten through the first four years of college.

“This is not about a ‘black agenda.’ This brief paper seeks to advance a broader discussion that is so badly needed: What is it that workers need and want, and how can it become the robust agenda that can truly rally the bottom 99% to collective action?” Terrence L. Melvin, president of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists and secretary-treasurer of the New York State AFL-CIO, said in a written statement that accompanied the report.

“We approach these questions in the voice of nearly 2.1 million African Americans in labor unions. We believe a frank and open conversation where diverse voices are heard can produce changes that will strengthen our movement and benefit all workers.”

The report also urges labor unions to conduct more organizing in right-to-work states, endorse only politicians who have a strong record of pro-labor voting, and ensure that “union leadership and staff reflect the demographics of the membership and the workers targeted in an organizing campaign.”

“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,” the report’s executive summary stated. “No tinkering around the edges! A transformed movement must

be inclusive because diversity carries the seeds of change, of untapped creativity.”

Aim to Improve Working Conditions. Release of the report comes amid protests by low-wage workers across the country and some union campaigns to address the issue. That includes the SEIU, which is in the midst of a campaign to raise the minimum wage in industries such as fast food (140 DLR A-11, 7/22/15).

The BLC report also pointed to a May 1 study by the Discount Foundation and the Neighborhood Funders Group (84 DLR A-13, 5/1/15). That study concluded that a partnership between black workers and labor unions could in part remove some of the barriers that keep black workers disproportionately employed in low-wage occupations.

The BLC report concluded that the American labor movement has been thwarted by anti-union campaigns and political influence. The “Achilles heel” of organized labor, it said, has been in part 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.”

The report highlights income disparities between whites and blacks and blacks’ disproportionately high unemployment rate compared to other races. The mention follows a March report released by the Labor Department’s Bureau of Labor Statistics that concluded that long-term unemployment remains problematic for blacks and Asians (55 DLR A-8, 3/23/15).

Blueprint for Improvements Offered. The BLC report lays out a “blueprint” to address unemployment and income disparities and to help ignite “improvements” in the nation’s overall labor force.

In addition to improving the nation’s public education system and bolstering job training programs in prisons, the report also calls for environmental changes such as cutting dependency on fossil fuels.

The report further details a series of areas where government can help bolster programs to improve conditions for the nation’s workforce. That includes expanding access to affordable child care and after-school programs for parents. The suggestion comes on the heels of a House resolution introduced July 28 by a group of Democrats that calls for broader access to affordable child care (144 DLR A-10, 7/28/15).

The BLC report also addresses issues regarding “tolerance and equality,” with suggested policies about immigration and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

According to the report's executive summary, a labor movement must be "inclusive" and a spark for justice and equality.

"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)," according to the summary, which referenced the SEIU's campaign to increase adjunct professor compensation to \$15,000 in salary and benefits per course. "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."

The group called for 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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