

**A Future for Workers:  
A Contribution from Black Labor**

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## **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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 policies 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 statutes 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.

# **A Future for Workers: A Contribution from Black Labor**

To be very direct, US workers need a *renewed* labor movement. They do not need the tinkering around of the edges of the old. They need something that is willing and capable of fighting, and equally capable of making the cause of workers the cause of the majority of this country. Until and unless it can achieve that goal, its future is more than in doubt; in fact, it has no future.

For more than forty years the living standard of the average US worker has either stagnated or declined. Organizations such as the Economic Policy Institute and the Center for Economic and Policy Research have repeatedly demonstrated these facts in black and white. There is little additional convincing that needs to be offered. As global capitalism has reorganized itself, it has done so to the disadvantage of the vast majority of the world's peoples. It has now been documented that the richest 1% of the population will soon own more wealth than the entire rest of the world's population. Such a polarization is not only staggering but helps to explain the immense political and economic resistance by global elites to policies that would benefit the world's majorities.

In the USA we have witnessed over the same time period, a transformation of our major cities. A racial and class 'cleansing' has taken place, making it increasingly difficult for working class people to remain in the cities, instead consigned to suburbs and 'dead' cities. In some cases, populations—particularly Latino immigrants and African Americans—have been relocated or directed to these dead cities where they exist in a contemporary version of the reservations that contain Native American nations. Few resources, little tax base, few jobs, terrible—or non-

existent—public transportation, dwindling autonomy as states limit urban independence from state-level oversight, and declining public education faces those who inhabit such dead cities as well as those inhabiting significant portions of major urban centers.

There is also a deepening authoritarian trend in the US political environment. Over the decades dissenting views find it more and more difficult to gain expression in the mainstream media. The parameters for acceptable debate have been narrowing. The intelligence agencies appear to have been given free reign, including within the USA (e.g., the National Security Agency), and local police departments are coming to resemble well-armed military units.

Authoritarianism can be found in the use of violence on the streets by law enforcement agencies. African American males in their early 20s have a *twenty-one times* chance of being killed by the police compared with whites of the same age. And, each time there is the killing of an African American, Latino or Native American youth, we are told that holding the police accountable is unacceptable given the risks that the police experience. Yet, how does one explain a ratio of 21/1? The implications appear to many to be nearly genocidal, particularly when combined with the cuts in social services and jobs, and the sense that entire populations, including but not limited to those of color, have been relegated to the ranks of the “redundant.”

Authoritarianism takes additional forms. The right to vote is being suppressed. Through actions carried out by the political Right there has been a targeting of African Americans, Latinos, youth, seniors, and in some cases, military personnel, for exclusion from the voting rolls. Instead of efforts to ease the ability to vote—and in fact, in opposition to encouraging greater voter participation—voting is becoming more complicated and burdensome. The political Right has alleged there to be a problem—voter fraud—where no evidence can be

offered to support such an assertion. What IS clear, however, is that the aim of the political Right is to narrow the actual electorate in accordance with their growing view that the *wrong* people are voting and must be, as a result, marginalized.

Black workers have been, for the working class as a whole, the canary in the mine. Black workers are the segment of the working class that are normally subject to the forward thrusts of employer offensives. It is the segment of the working class that suffers the most from unemployment and underemployment. The unemployment rates for whites, Latinos and Asian Americans with less than a high school education are all in single digits, while the overall unemployment rate for African Americans is in double digits. And, while the unemployment rates have fallen for whites, Latinos and Asian Americans so that they have all returned to levels of May 2008, the African American unemployment rate alone is still above that level. It is the most obvious and brutalized victim of law enforcement lawlessness, not to mention other forms of lynchings. Yet they are not the only ones to suffer under the juggernaut of capital.

What befalls the Black worker inevitably confronts the bulk of the US working class, however, there is a failure in both much of academia as well as within the ranks of organized labor to recognize that the Black working class is, indeed, a component of the larger working class and not some marginal category. The problem is that when the US working class, and organized labor in particular, fails to respond to the toxicity of capital's eternal search for greater profits irrespective of consequences as it impacts Black workers, it inevitably is incapable of withstanding the assault when it expands.

This failure is noted in the false dichotomy between workers and the poor. Those who suffer the most from the ravages of the market are perceived as poor and therefore outside the



working class. Rather than view the plight the poor as the depths of what society is willing to heap on workers, the poor are viewed as those who do not exert the effort to join the ranks of workers. The initial attacks on the working class were on the safety nets and social insurance that protected those who suffered when the economy didn't produce enough jobs, or jobs at high wages, or health insurance or pensions.

Ironically, the worker safeguards of the minimum wage, unemployment insurance, social security, and aid to families with dependent children were designed to help workers, but defined a large set of workers—domestic workers and agricultural workers—outside their scope; the jobs performed by the bulk of Black workers at the time. Not until the 1960s, when Black workers climbed their way out of domestic work and agricultural work and into the working class, did the beneficiaries of the safety net get demonized as being outside the working class.

So, Ronald Reagan's attacks on the minimum wage, families being helped by welfare, those receiving unemployment insurance when the economy failed, became racialized attacks; and not viewed as attacks on the foundations of worker survival. So, in the 1980s, the real value of the minimum wage drifted to unprecedented lows, states rolled back eligibility to, and benefit levels for, unemployment insurance and the foundation was laid to attack women who needed help in raising their children to force them into low-wage work. Without providing any gains to American workers, Reagan mastered the appearance of worker advancement by succeeding not by having wages rise with productivity, as had been the case, but by having wages rise relative to the poor who could not find jobs, or could only find minimum wage jobs. The silence of the labor movement in the sinking fortunes of the poor meant there was political space, for the first time since the 1930s, to have the economy improve and expand while the poverty rate increased.

The failure of the labor movement to defend the poor, became the failure of the labor movement to stand firmly with the victories won during the New Deal for worker protections. This is based on a faulty view that the wages of organized labor are divorced from the full set of worker protections of the New Deal. And, this menu approach to pick and choose protecting the safety net, meant that as fewer elements of the safety-net remained, it became easier to attack those few remaining elements. Thus, by the 1990s, when Bill Clinton became the first President to undo the Social Security Act and permanently separate Aid to Families with Dependent Children from the social insurance aspects of the Act, he was then able to broach the idea of privatizing the Old Age and Survivors Benefits at Social Security's core.

The huge increase in a desperately vulnerable work force meant that protecting an organized portion of the work force became increasingly harder to defend. By joining forces with the bosses against the poor, rather than making it easier to organize vulnerable workers pushed to desperation for any job at any wage, it became harder to organize; and it became harder politically to claim solidarity with those vulnerable workers who had needed allies to protect the safety-net. Silence in allowing the safety-net to become racialized, meant silence in addressing the plight of Black workers.

The lack of political cohesion between the Black working class and whites meant a break down in the vision of the problem. As Black joblessness rose, and Black poverty rose in the wake of the 1980s recovery, two visions emerged of how the economy worked. For adult white men, unemployment peaked at 9.0% at the end of 1982 and fell to 3.9% by 1988. For adult Black men, unemployment peaked at 20.7% at the end of 1982 and would only reach 9.1% by the fall of 1988. For 103 straight months from January 1980 to July 1988, adult Black men faced

double digit levels of unemployment; and not until December of 1994 did adult Black men get to an unemployment rate below the 9.0% peak level of white unemployment back in 1982.

From the Black perspective then, the economy was collapsing. The relative position of white workers put white workers at a level that was very envious. The best of times for Black workers were very close to the worse of times for whites. And, from the white perspective, Blacks who did not benefit from the 1980s expansion appeared to be “non-workers” who failed to seize opportunities. The reality is that the pie was shrinking for workers in general. Wages were stagnant. White “gains” were not gains relative to 1979, before the 1980s recessions, they were only gains relative to the depths of the downturn and relative to the worsening plight of the poor. The median earnings of white male workers did not surpass their 1978 levels until 1998. But, at their lowest point, when white male median earnings dropped to \$37,000 in 1981, it was still higher than the peak median earnings Black men reached in 2006 of \$34,118.

The national dialogue shifted. Rather than understand the plight of declining wages and shrinking safety-nets, the public illusion was continued that workers and the poor were of different classes, and the Black “underclass” was permanently ill-prepared for the changes taking place in a modernizing economy. Unfortunately, the Black analysis of the situation was the same. Rather than view the loss of manufacturing jobs in the 1980s as a general decline in the opportunities of workers, the dialogue in the Black community viewed the decline of those jobs as uniquely affecting Black workers. And, it became a dominant view in the Black community that an “underclass” of the community was rising, divorced from the better ethic of America’s working class; and, ignoring the decline in opportunity, that the regrettable lack of skills among Blacks explained the plight of the Black community. This completed the circle. The Black

community was adrift, seeing no common cause with a labor movement out of its reach. And the labor movement so no common cause with an “underclass.”

As such, there is a need for a new and differently functioning movement. It is not that Black workers need a new labor movement, or Latinos need a new movement, or that women need a new movement. Unless we are prepared to let global capitalism run wild, destroying both the environment and the lives of those on ‘spaceship Earth,’ workers as a whole must heed the call of resistance, and that resistance necessitates a transformed and reinvigorated labor movement.

It is with this in mind that we, humbly, suggest that workers need an agenda that focuses on power rather than on grievances. An agenda, we should be clear, that must emerge through discussions among workers, their unions, and their communities, focusing on the needs of working people. Through this document, we, as Black labor leaders and activists, hope to advance such a discussion. This document is not a final document, nor is it offered in order to end discussion. Precisely the contrary. Our objective, through the circulation of this document, is to advance a discussion that is so badly needed. What is it that workers need and want and how can this become, not ‘special interests,’ but instead the flag flown by the bottom 90% of the population? Those are the questions that confront us, and from which we cannot turn away.

If a new labor movement does not raise its own flag and rally the vast majority of those who are seeing their dreams squeezed out of existence by global capitalism, it is quite possible that the developing anger will be channeled in dangerous directions, e.g., towards right-wing populism. Right-wing populism is an illness of anger, intolerance and irrationality that frequently emerges within capitalism during times of pressure and crisis, times such as those in

which we live. As such, the forces of progress have little time to waste and, indeed, we must continue to recognize that *failure is not an option*.

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***Jobs & Economic Development:*** How can a society permit a situation where in order to live, one must have money, and in order to gain money, one must work, yet everyone is not guaranteed the right to a job? In effect, we have been raised in a society of ‘musical chairs’ whereby the resources for a genuine livelihood always exist in deficit when compared with the numbers of people who need such resources.

Yet the problem or challenge is far deeper. Employment discrimination means that the working class is structurally divided. Jobs are not handed out equally, and since colonial times there have been divisions in the workforce that have been sewn in order to ensure that workers fight one another rather than fighting together for justice. There is a racial differential in treatment that includes who gets what jobs; how long it takes in order to secure employment; and in what proportions which demographic groups find themselves under-employed and unemployed.

If there is to be a progressive approach to a worker’s agenda, it must include, but not necessarily limit itself to the following:

- There must be a societal commitment to full employment. All those who wish to work, should have ample opportunity for gainful employment. First priority must be given to the proper economic policies—insuring that the Federal Reserve makes full employment the primary target and tracks policies against rising wages and the elimination of discriminatory gaps in Black and white unemployment rates; and the use of the Robin

Hood Tax (a .5% tax on Wall Street transactions) in order to generate resources that can be used for the myriad of challenges that confront the economy in a downturn to insure sufficient counter-cyclical fiscal policy is automatically put in place during economic downturns to keep massive unemployment from ever occurring again. The funds from the tax can be held in a trust to provide adequate investment in long-term public capital needs like infrastructure, schools, libraries, hospitals, public transportation and college loans for human capital development.

- The best insurance for worker flexibility is full employment that pushes up wages with productivity. Rising worker incomes insures rising demand to allow for the reallocation of workers in the face of rising productivity as occurred from 1946 to 1979. And, in times of slack, for workers that are victimized by technological changes or business restructuring should be guaranteed transitional income whereby they can seek education and training in a new field with a comparable living standard.
- In cases where a worker, through no fault of their own, is unable to gain new, comparable employment, they shall be assisted in creating new opportunities for work, including their being funded in non-traditional areas. This can include a variety of possibilities including worker cooperatives; Works Progress Administration-type projects that focus on the arts; and providing students with income support in order that they may complete their education without either the threat of never-ending debt or the threat of removal from school for failure to pay.
- Central to all of this is that the nature of “work” must be redefined to include the myriad of tasks necessary for a healthy and progressing society.

- Municipal and county authorities will create or reform “redevelopment authorities” whose key mandate is the creation of sustainable economies, including through the use of eminent domain and alternative economic development strategies that are focused on raising the living standard of working people.

*The Cities:* The cities have been undergoing a fundamental transformation since the 1950s. Suburbanization and automation resulted in dramatic demographic shifts, to which must be added the phenomenon of immigration. The first shift was the transformation of many cities into major centers for people of color. With this change there was also an industry shift, whereby large-scale manufacturing tended to move away from the central cities and into suburbs, exurbs or elsewhere. This very much affected the tax base of cities.

A strange reversal began to take place in the late 1960s/early 1970s with the rise in prominence of Finance, Insurance and Real Estate (FIRE) as key sectors of capital in the cities. Under their growing dominance, a process of gentrification began—coinciding with the 1970s fuel crises—which brought about a shift in urban demographics. White, professional/managerial employees, along with elements of the employer class, began moving into the cities and slowly forcing the working class out. Traditional working class neighborhoods, and particularly those of people of color, began to undergo dramatic changes making them nearly unrecognizable. We are living with this to this day. The result is that workers have been forced to live farther from major metropolitan cities, resulting in a phenomenon more closely analogous to Europe than pre-1980 USA.

Key elements of an agenda include, but are not limited to:

- An attack on predatory lending, which has been a means to drive working class people out of their homes.
- Government supported financing for home buying.
- Employment training programs that are both accessible but also translate into long-term careers. Such training programs need to be oriented towards producing and/or strengthening a workforce for high-end employment.
- Environmental clean-up projects focusing on reclaiming land destroyed through corporate land abuse.
- Eminent domain limited to being an instrument for economic development.
- Governmental support of worker cooperatives especially under circumstances where neighborhoods and cities have been abandoned by private capital.
- An attack on housing segregation, which continues to plague our cities.
- Restructuring the tax system so that it relies less on property taxes and sales taxes and, instead, moves toward a progressive system of taxation based on wealth and income.
- Re-envisioning local tax structures, so that tax burdens and safety-net obligations match, and insure that local governments have sufficient revenue autonomy to raise revenues to sustain public services. This is to balance needs for hospitals, safety, water and sewage and welfare expenditures between cities and counties, or cities and sub-burbs to avoid declining revenues by tax avoidance by suburban sprawl for city services. And, enhance the importance of cities, by building in a safety-net for urban revenue streams during down-turns through the structure of the Robin-Hood Tax proposal.



- An end to the blockade of cities by state governments whereby creative measures are undermined by nefarious political forces.

***Environment:*** The question of the environment frequently divides organized labor. It is less about climate change denial. Instead it revolves around the counterposing of jobs vs. the environment. As a result some unions have either remained silent in the face of environmental disaster or they have joined hands with employers in advancing projects that are antithetical to human existence.

In order to work, one must be able to breath. In order to live, one must be able to avoid extreme weather, floods, and pestilence. Yet, with 97% of climate scientists agreeing on the danger and reality of climate change, we nevertheless have lethargy on this question in the ranks of organized labor.

The environmental crisis has a particular impact on communities of color. The establishment of toxic facilities near neighborhoods; the failure to clean up toxic sites; and the dangers inherent in rising ocean levels on communities near the shoreline all have a disproportionate impact on communities of color. There is also the phenomenon of toxic dumping which frequently occurs in the vicinity of working class communities.

The nature of the growing environmental crisis could become genocidal in its implications. The rich and super-rich not only will take whatever measures necessary in order to preserve their existence, but they will continue to shift the burden of the environmental crisis onto working class communities, communities of color, and, indeed, the global South. An example of the latter can be found in the corporate search for countries in the global South that will become the new ‘home’ for toxic wastes. Another example, as Naomi Klein has pointed out,

has been the burning off of natural gas in Nigeria which oil companies have decided not to harness due to cost. The impact of this is devastating for Nigeria and the planet as a whole.

Key elements of an agenda include but are not limited to:

- Immediate steps to cut fossil fuel emissions with a recognition that countries of the global North have a special responsibility since they got a head start with the Industrial Revolution.
- The creation of “climate jobs” through the introduction of planned steps to address climate change. This includes new technologies, e.g., advanced windmills, to addressing beach erosion, the planting of trees, advanced water filtration. It also includes planning in connection with accounting for the impact of climate change, e.g., additional funding to FEMA, retrofitting.
- Full funding for the transition of worker and worker institutions out of the fossil fuel industry, including the full protection of retirement and retiree health and welfare benefits.
- An end to fracking.
- A counter to corporate agriculture and, instead, offering support of family farms. Corporate agriculture is contributing to the destruction of the top-soil and diversification of crops will be essential.
- Foreign aid assistance to the countries engaged in work to address the environmental crisis.
- Ceasing efforts to transplant the waste of the global North to the global South.

- Renewed efforts to address toxic pollution that has resulted from corporate America. The corporations should be appropriately taxed to cover this cost rather than placing the cost on the US taxpayer.

***Criminal Justice:*** The US worker has always had a complicated relationship to the criminal justice system. When workers have organized on their own behalf, they have frequently encountered repression carried out by corporate America and their political allies. The instruments of such repression have generally been the police.

There has been a special challenge in the relationship of communities of color to the criminal justice system. The system was used against communities of color, whether one is talking about African slave communities, Native American nations, Chicano/Mexicano land owners and farmer, or imported Chinese workers. The system has largely worked against such communities. For the most part, members of those communities were presumed guilty by the criminal justice system irrespective of the fact-pattern.

The “BlackLivesMatter” movement, that emerged in the context of the killing of Michael Brown (in Ferguson, Missouri), has called attention to the disproportionate use of violence against communities of color. The fact that African American youth in their early 20s have a 21 times chance of getting shot and killed by police, compared with whites of the same age, is illustrative of the reality that racist differentials in treatment are alive and well and not part of the imagination of media commentators.

Compounding this is the outrageous fact that the USA has the largest prison population on the planet, a fact largely avoided in polite company. Through the various so-called “wars” against crime, drugs and now terrorism, entire communities have been demonized and targeted

for surveillance and repression. This has resulted in a disproportionate incarceration of African Americans and Latinos compared with their percentage of the overall population (or, for that matter, their actual involvement in criminal activities).

Key elements of an agenda include but are not limited to:

- A reorientation toward non-violent crimes. Mediation, drug courts, etc., need to be introduced in order to reduce the number of individuals incarcerated.
- Decriminalization of drug use and moves towards the formal regulation of all “substances.” Drugs should be treated in much the same way that alcohol was addressed at the end of Prohibition. This would immediately address matters such as the proliferation of gangs and related violence.
- Jobs for those who wish to work. Repeatedly crime rates correspond to unemployment rates. When there is gainful employment, crime drops. What more needs to be said.
- Equitable sentencing: Address sentencing disparities whereby comparable crimes are handled differently depending on whether the crime(s) committed is associated with individuals of color compared with whites.
- Civilian Review Boards of Police: Despite the continuous opposition to civilian review boards by police organizations it is more than clear that unless police work is overseen by the citizenry, the police believe that they can behave *carte blanche* in their approach to law enforcement. Civilians must have a credible opportunity to have their concerns about police misbehavior addressed.

- A full desegregation of law enforcement: All law enforcement agencies must fully represent the people that they are supposed to serve. This means that hiring processes must be instituted to guarantee appropriate demographic representation.

***Distribution of wealth:*** The USA is witnessing the greatest polarization of wealth since the 1920s. With the restructuring of global capitalism, this wealth polarization is not a US-only situation. On a global scale wealth is being concentrated into the hands of fewer and fewer people. With the destruction of organizations of workers—including but not limited to labor unions—global capitalism has been permitted to run wild. This must be brought in for a landing.

The unequal distribution of wealth has a gender and racial side to it. Women continue to face wage discrimination, whether in times of plenty or times of recession. Corporate America and their allies continuously excuse this but the reality is that for similar or the same work, wages and salaries are generally unequal. Women are also frequently faced with the burdens associated with single-parent childcare and the impact that this has on the ability to accumulate any degree of savings.

Wealth inequality has a dramatic racial component. The group United for a Fair Economy has repeatedly demonstrated that there is a tremendous, and only occasionally addressed, wealth gap between whites, on the one hand, and African Americans and Latinos on the other. Most recently the Pew Research Center confirmed that the wealth “...of white households was 13 times the median wealth of black households in 2013, compared with eight times the wealth in 2010, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis of data from the Federal Reserve’s *Survey of Consumer Finances*. Likewise, the wealth of white households is now more than 10 times the wealth of Hispanic households, compared with nine times the wealth

*in 2010.*” [<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/12/racial-wealth-gaps-great-recession/>]

We must understand that the racial wealth gap is an historical legacy rather than the result of ethics, family behavior or other personal matters. In the case of African Americans, the racial gap originates from the different conditions under which our ancestors arrived in what is today the United States of America—as slaves rather than immigrants—and the post-Reconstruction reality of enforced Jim Crow racist oppression that extended legal barriers to income and wealth accumulation through 1964. The gap, in other words, is *structural*, which is the principal factor in the periodic and historic discussion of reparations, irrespective of one’s view on the specifics of that proposal.

But, we must not play into the hands of those who see wealth only as individual wealth differences. We must also seek to expand the common wealth. This is done by extending and expanding support of public higher education, of extending and expanding Social Security benefits; and extending and expanding public space—urban park space and urban waterways; “homestead” farming of urban lands.

The gender and racial dimension to the distribution of wealth reminds us that the notion of a ‘rising tide raises all boats’ is good myth but fails as either analysis or proscription. Unless structural moves are undertaken to address the gender and racial aspects to wealth distribution, wealth distribution will be socially unbalanced.

Key elements of an agenda include but are not limited to:

- Support for the Robin Hood Tax—to be used to provide for public security. The Robin Hood Tax needs to be devoted to insuring the continuation of the public sector when

financial collapse robs the treasury of the commons (including the protection of public pensions and public sector jobs); and the holdings of the Robin Hood Tax should be set aside, in trust, for investment in the common good like public infrastructure, the expansion of public colleges and universities, public hospitals and public libraries.

- Compensation from banks and other lending institutions for the devastation wrought by the 2007/2008 collapse that followed from financial speculation and predatory behavior on their parts. In addressing the implication of the 2007/2008 collapse it is critical to appreciate that there was a racial differential in the impact of the collapse *and in its aftermath*. Communities of color have, by and large, still not recovered from the devastation brought about by that economic tsunami.
- Addressing gender discrimination in all aspects (particularly employment), including challenging the Supreme Court's efforts to undermine disparate impact claims (e.g., the claims against Walmart).
- The full legitimization of areas of work dominated by women, including, the raising of wage and salary rates to that of livable rates. Particularly in areas of childcare and domestic care, the work is treated as if it is a side-line and subsidiary function, rather than authentic work. That must cease.
- Progressive income tax rates that target wealth and income. Opposition to flat tax proposals.
- A "Marshall Plan," as described by the National Urban League, to address the rebuilding of communities of color, including economic development strategies. Utilizing a similar

approach to address structural unemployment and underdevelopment within the white poor.

- Opposition to lending discrimination that discourages investment and development in communities of color.
- Expansion of child care and after school programs for working parents.
- Pay equity legislation and additional action to address the history and current realities of racist oppression and discrimination.

***Peace & Justice:*** Workers need the US to have a foreign policy that advances peace and justice rather than one perceived by the majority of the planet as being one of bullying and to the advantage of global capitalism. International trade deals are promoting a race to the bottom between workers in various countries, a race which seems to have no ending. Countries that do not accede to the demands of global capitalism find themselves in the crosshairs of this or that agency of the US government, frequently condemned as maverick or rogue states. And, we in the USA, who oppose unfair and burdensome trade deals are written off in the so-called mainstream as out of touch with today's reality.

Additionally, we find ourselves in what appears to be a situation of perpetual war. Every conflict seems to move in the direction of sanctions or military action rather than efforts at negotiated settlement. The population feels regularly manipulated into supporting this or that military action only to later discover that the rationale was flawed in its fundamentals.

Who suffers? Quite obviously, as we saw in the illegal and immoral invasion of Iraq, the people of the country targeted for intervention (whether direct or covert). At the same time, we



in the USA bear our own burden. Our young men and women—largely from the working class—place their lives on the line for causes, issues, etc., over which they have no input.

This tragedy of this situation is compounded when we better understand why our young men and women enlist in the first place. While certainly there is patriotic enlistment, there is also what has come to be understood as an “economic draft,” i.e., that workers, in the absence of other employment opportunities, are drawn toward the military. In other words, in order to gain the resources to attend college or to gain an advanced skill for the work world, young workers are forced into military service. This puts a lie to the notion that military service is in any genuine respect voluntary. To further compound the problem, these young men and women are finding it harder and harder to access the very resources promised them. This ranges from lack of adequate access to health care to lack of employment opportunities.

Key elements of an agenda include but are not limited to:

- A cessation of free trade agreements and a renegotiation of all existing agreements already in place in order to address environmental, and economic development challenges faced by all signatories.
- A commitment by the USA to a plank of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries unless as part of legal, legitimate multi-lateral bodies, e.g., the United Nations.
- A commitment to an international process for the deconstruction and disassembling of all weapons of mass destruction.

- Economic assistance to developing countries not conditioned by acceptance of neo-liberal economic policies.
- A removal of US military bases from around the world to be replaced by a reliance on international bodies for mutual protection and enforcement of international law.
- Expanded services in health care and job placement for veterans.

**Education:** To a great extent, investment in public education in the USA has collapsed. A process of strangulation has taken place whereby resources for public education have been systematically reduced over the years. Whether in K-12, or in public higher education, parents with means are being pushed in the direction of private education, and the so-called public education facilities are being forced to increasingly rely on outside support (whether bake sales in K-12 or corporate contributions in higher education).

Insofar as the tax base for education continues to largely rely on property and sales, this results in a reinforcement of segregated education. As with traditional Jim Crow (and *de facto Jim Crow*) segregation, one is not speaking narrowly about the simple separation of populations by race or ethnicity but rather the suppression of entire populations, including but not limited to the restriction of resources. This is precisely what has happened in the case of education.

Instead of cuts, we need enhanced resources for public education and extended learning time for students which allows for collaboration time among staff. We need to move away from the privatization of education and the segmenting of education in the form of those charter programs that are misguided and not community centered.

What, in effect, we are ‘feeling’ are the changing educational needs of global capitalism. The same needs that it once had for a diverse workforce with mixed forms of education have

changed. Entire sections of the working class are now considered *redundant*. It is easier to imprison them than educate them. And while there are demonstrable educational needs for the workforce of the future, many students lack access to the occupations that are arising and they do not have these significant educational qualifications. Thus, the elite believes that expenditures on public education are, at best, unnecessary.

Additionally what we are observing is the commodification of knowledge and the removal of the last impediment of market domination of the public sphere. So, we are taking what was a common held public good—a well-educated and informed citizenry with educational institutions serving as the safeguard of social, moral and ethical norms and the generators of new knowledge—and transforming into a commodity that can be traded on the market place to the extent it has market value, namely vocational skills in pursuit of global capital, and to those who can afford to acquire it. Unfortunately, the latter, has led to too much concern on the affordability of education, and less on the public ownership of knowledge.

An agenda should include but not be limited to:

- Ending the war against teachers' unions.
- A Constitutional amendment guaranteeing all people in the USA the right to a free, quality education pre-K-12 plus through four years of undergraduate education.
- Increased resources for public colleges, and a full recognition of the cost of education to support the success of students from poor households; with a special effort to re-endow our public colleges especially targeted at historically Black colleges and universities and those colleges that currently have over 40% of their students as Pell eligible (students from low-income families that qualify for public grants—as opposed only to loans—to pay for tuition).

- Support for Historically Black Colleges & Universities
- Reduced class sizes.
- Bi-lingual education for those who need or request it.
- Comprehensive, standards based curriculum including foreign language, physical education, music & arts education for all children beginning in elementary school.
- Community schools that provide for the academic, health and social emotional needs of students and their families.

***Tolerance & Equity:*** We live in a society that likes to believe itself to be both tolerant and equitable. Yet, this is a society that has been deeply divided along gender, racial, ethnic and class lines since its inception. Many, if not all, of those divisions help the societal elite maintain dominance by ensuring that those at the bottom fight endless wars of all against all with each other rather than joining together to gain justice.

In the current moment there is a war against women. This is not only or mainly about abortion. It revolves around shifting gender roles and expectations. It involves the challenge to male dominance in the context of a shifting economy whereby the traditional role of male-as-breadwinner is shifting or collapsing. Women have been scapegoated for the changing circumstances of men and, especially in cases where there are a surplus of men in the workforce, women are treated as if they are the source of the precarious existence of the male workforce.

At a time of the most dramatic migrations in history, immigrants have been targeted by right-wing populists as the cause of the declining living standards of the so-called native populations. Particularly immigrants from Latin America, Asia and Africa are demonized in North America and Europe. They are caricatured as incompatible with the culture, language,

etc., of the populations which they seek to enter. If they are Muslim, there is a double demonization, whereby they are held responsible for the criminal acts of small numbers of Islamic religious fascists.

Race has resurfaced, both in connection with the rise of immigration but also with particular regard to people of African descent. The "new racism" suggests that there are populations that simply cannot get along and must live separately. In some cases the new racism repeats the stands of the "old" racism in implying--or stating outright--that certain populations are inferior or otherwise dispensable. In other cases, it is far more subtle and the main line of demarcation is allegedly one of culture.

Gender expression and identification has become the new battle group for equality and rights. From issues of marriage, to access to restrooms, down to violence based on appearance the LGBTQ community has long been the literal and figurative whipping children of the Right Wing. Either by stirring fear amongst their religious members or demanding protections for discriminatory practices, the treatment of LGBTQ members has become the litmus test for acceptable discrimination.

Intolerance is advanced by right-wing populists and its appeal is to those who are unsettled, or victimized, by the changes that are underway under global capitalism. Rather than advancing equity and justice, right-wing populists propose to write off entire populations. They hold specific, allegedly alien or dangerous populations responsible for our larger social problems rather than understanding that it is the very nature of the way that the system operates that represents the greatest source of danger.

This intolerance and inequity works its way into the political system. As earlier mentioned, efforts at voter suppression have been engaged in order to limit the franchise and,

instead, dispossess African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asians, the poor, youth and elderly. Through creating a fictitious problem of alleged voter fraud, political charlatans have instilled fear in segments of the population about a problem that does not exist.

An agenda should include but not be limited to:

- Just immigration policies that reconnect families, and provide equitable and fair means to migrate.
- Foreign assistance to countries that have been the victims of outside interference and corporate rape in order to provide mechanisms for their countries to establish a means for their respective populations to live fruitful lives.
- A genuine national dialogue on race and racism that engages organizations, schools and other institutions in an examination of the legacy and current existence of racist discrimination and xenophobia.
- Support for genuine affirmative action to address historic disparities based on race, gender and ethnicity. The objective must be to repair the damage.
- Empowered governmental institutions that address discrimination based on the historic categories.
- An assertion that women have a right to control their own bodies and destinies free and clear of all terror and intimidation.
- Equal protections and applications of all laws to the LGBTQ community.

***The Labor Movement:*** The Labor Movement has always been on the cutting edge of social and economic change. As the main vehicle for establishing equality for working people, Labor has

held a position of influence in both US politics and zeitgeist. As working people made advances on the job through organizing, they then applied those same skills to the societal ills afflicting them.

Currently Labor is under a well-financed and well organized opposition movement. From attacks on right to work laws, to slashing benefits, down to demonizing public workers, the Labor Movement is at its weakest. Union membership is rapidly decreasing with little hope in increasing membership with a dramatic and radical change in direction. Current methods and tactics have proven inadequate to the ever evolving attacks the Movement currently faces. After successfully bearing blame for much of the financial crisis, the largest sector of union members (the Public Sector) is actively being dismantled either by eroding union membership, erasing union protections, or privatizing the jobs themselves.

Labor realized there was power in concentrating members' voting power in electing friendly candidates. At first candidates felt the need to pander for Labor's vote by supporting pro-worker legislation. Currently Labor has been following a "Lesser of 2 Evils" endorsement policy, backing candidates that do not completely represent the interests of workers. Different sectors of the Labor Movement compete by endorsing candidates that promise to only help one particular sect of worker rather than all working people. This has become a race to the bottom where candidates do not value Labor's voice, rather they only pander for Labor's money. This practice has diluted Labor's power and influence over the political process.

As industry has evolved and been outsourced, the number of unionized industries has dramatically decreased. Whole sectors of workers have been ignored or neglected by the Labor Movement for short-sighted or xenophobic reasons. Low wage earners have largely been avoided by Unions as the wages those workers make are not seen as worth the cost of unionizing them.

Unfortunately those workers also tend to be largely people of color and women, further enlarging the racial and gender divide that makes up the Labor Movement.

Union membership is at historic lows. The public perception of union members is at its worst with teachers bearing an unacceptable blame for failing schools, underfunded pensions, and general economic malaise. The Labor Movement is viewed largely as isolated and self-serving by the public. What was once seen as the vehicle towards economic prosperity is now being blamed as the obstacle. Non-union workers often view the Labor Movement enviously and spitefully, seeing Labor only protect the unionized while remaining silent on the larger economic battlefield. This has led to public bashing and lower interests in people supporting the Movement as a whole. While surveys and data show most workers want to join a union, the process and purpose for joining has become too foreign and unattractive. Lower interest in the Labor Movement leads to diminished support and further erosion of the benefits workers have fought and earned over the years.

Key elements of an agenda include but are not limited to:

- Endorse candidates with a 90-100% Labor Voting Record only. No “lesser of 2 evils” endorsements.
- Organize southern workers and workers in Right to Work states.
- Ensure leadership and staff reflect demographics of membership.
- Inject organizers into community organizing campaigns.
- Commit to organizing service and low wage industry jobs as they are the largest employing sector.



- Expand resources and support for international solidarity and organizing campaigns.
- Expand non-discrimination clauses in contracts to represent all workers.

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*Needing a renovated labor movement to adopt & implement this agenda*

Our trade union movement must be part of creating a new labor movement. It must be a movement that understands that justice for workers truly means justice for all workers. As such, where there are obstacles that are set in the way of some, it is the obligation of all of labor to remove them. This means thinking very differently about our tasks, friends, allies and challenges.

A renovated labor movement must be something that workers see as their instrument for justice and equity. It is not enough for us to speak to economic issues, though that will remain at the core of our mission. In addition we must be understood as a movement that fights for democracy, justice and the survival of life on this planet. We must be a movement that truly understands ‘solidarity’ as not just a word in a song, but an actual practice of workers across occupations, trades, regions, race/ethnicities, genders and national borders; a practice based on a recognition of common interests and common opponents. There is nothing unusual or unprecedented about such a mission. It is consistent with the best traditions of the global working class.

It is also not enough for our movement to adopt an agenda and then adjourn. Any agenda of workers must be one that is the subject of debate, modification and implementation. We are in a movement that is very comfortable with the passing of countless resolutions, too many of which are never enacted. We must break with such a heritage and commit to changing our ways.

The final version of a worker's agenda must be a living document that guides and is guided by the efforts of workers to achieve our most lofty goals. We have yet to gain the emancipation that all workers deserve!

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