CHAPTER 17

THE NEED FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE UNIONISM

In many respects, the U.S. trade union movement is akin to a tire with a slow leak. You can walk out to the car in the morning, notice that the tire is low, and go to a gas station to add some air. All day the tire may look fine, but overnight it loses air and is low again the next morning. If it is not actually flat, you may decide to refill it and keep driving. Then one day the tire has a blowout, destroying, in one catastrophic moment, not only the tire but potentially the car and driver as well.

Those who advocate organizing new members into existing unions as the solution to the crisis of U.S. labor are essentially refilling a slow-leaking tire. This stopgap measure is certainly better than not taking action, but it is, at best, a temporary repair of an underlying problem. To draw out the metaphor a bit more: depending on the nature of the puncture, the slow leak may be repairable, or deep-seated structural damage may necessitate a new tire.

The conclusion we have drawn, based on the analysis presented here, is that the current framework of U.S. trade unionism is so fundamentally flawed that a new framework is needed. With that new framework will inevitably come new organizational structures, but forging new structures without defining the moment and defining the framework would simply create new problems. This situation has become obvious even to reformers within the existing structures, whether the CTW Federation or the Sweeney team at the AFL-CIO.
As exemplified by both Stern’s reference to Irish tripartism and Sweeney’s nearly uncritical support of the Clinton administration and the Democrats, the principal faces of U.S. trade unionism have misanalyzed the moment. They have concluded

• that there is a wing of U.S. capital with a strategic interest in partnering with labor
• that the U.S. state is a neutral vessel that can be filled by either side—capital or labor—and thus can serve a historical role as arbiter
• that the U.S. labor movement and the trade unions are essentially one and the same
• that pragmatism needs to be the guiding philosophy of the union movement
• that the demands and needs of the working class can largely be reduced to the bargaining and institutional demands of the trade unions
• that the members are largely the objects rather than the subjects of change

In sum, given the framework shared by the two sides, the split in the AFL-CIO was a pointless exercise that has neither repaired the tire nor recognized that it must be replaced.

A need exists for an alternative framework for trade unionism—which we call social justice unionism. Elements of this framework have already been formulated and put into practice. Nevertheless, social justice unionism has not yet come together as a coherent program with the requisite solid underpinnings of theory and practice. The remaining sections of this book set forth the key elements of this framework.

THE INEVITABILITY OF CLASS STRUGGLE

The inevitability of class struggle is a useful starting point. Arriving at a precise definition of class struggle is particularly important, because the notion of class struggle has been perverted over the years in the U.S. trade union movement. Class struggle and trade union struggle are not necessarily the same thing. Trade union struggle is a subset of class struggle. Class struggle emerges from a simple dynamic: in a society with a social surplus and a division between those who produce and those who make decisions, a struggle inevitably occurs over that surplus. Insofar as the surplus ultimately results from the uncompensated labor power of workers and those workers—whether working or rendered “redundant”—have no say over the disposition of that surplus, an antagonism develops between those who possess the means of distributing that surplus (and thus hold power) and those who do not: those with the means to distribute the surplus ultimately control society’s means of production, distribution, and exchange.

Class struggle, then, is not something that can be turned on and off: it can, however, take various forms, depending on the leadership of the contending sides. It can also be influenced by conditions external to the society in which it occurs. Class struggle, in other words, is not a situation in which workers or unions create “problems” but a social interaction resulting from the nature of a class society.

Class struggle is built into the fabric of all societies that have classes. It is not just a matter of what does or does not take place in a particular workplace or set of workplaces. It also involves who can live in what sections of a city, who is exposed to toxic wastes, who gets access to what sorts of education, whose votes are counted in elections, and who pays attention to greenhouse gases.

Class struggle interacts with, is influenced by, and influences other social struggles. Class does not act alone in an abstract economic relationship. Though additional, independent forms of oppression are at work within a capitalist society, such as race and gender, these forms regularly overlap with class. By way of example, race often becomes, in the words of Dr. Manning Marable, the prism through which issues of class are seen in the United States, given the strength of white supremacy and racism in U.S. society. Class is often viewed as secondary to race, given the totality of racist oppression. Black or Chicano workers may perceive their treatment to be the result of race or nationality rather than an outgrowth of class oppression. Class struggle within Black America, then, can be perceived as a conflict between those who are “genuinely” African American and those who have “sold out” to whites.

Race oppression and gender oppression both exist independently of class oppression—gender oppression, for example, goes back thousands of years through various modes of production—but they are also affected by issues of class. The exclusion of a sector of the female population, particularly white females, from much of the formal workforce toward the end of the nineteenth century marked a remarkable convergence of issues of race (the notion that real women were white women and that they had a special place outside of the workforce), gender (the
The notion that men were the breadwinners and women the competitors, and class (efforts to establish social control over the entire workforce and introduce changes in the production process).

For these reasons, twenty-first-century unionism cannot view class oppression simply as an economic concept that exists in isolation from other forms of oppression in capitalist society. Race and gender are not just grafted onto class division in capitalist society. The interrelationship of these forms of oppression means that twenty-first-century unionism must advocate for consistent social justice rather than restrict itself to narrow employer-employee relations.

Nor only does class go beyond employer versus employee; it is also about more than bargaining units, collections of bargaining units, or even sectors of the economy. Class speaks to the relationship of individuals and groups of individuals to the production process and power. As such, twenty-first-century unionism must recognize that struggles beyond the workplace are as legitimate as struggles within the workplace—and we are not speaking only of political or legislative struggles. For instance, the battle over the reconstruction of the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina since 2005 is a class and racial struggle. The vastly different ideas for a rebuilt Gulf Coast reflect class and racial politics. For that reason, the union movement now only must seek to provide relief for the hurricane victims but also should position itself at the center of this struggle for justice. A struggle of this magnitude has implications nationally and is as worthy of solidarity as any collective-bargaining battle—if not more so.

From this perspective, one must be critical of the response of both the AFL-CIO and CTW to the Katrina disaster. Though both federations provided extremely generous material support to the evacuees and have been active in rebuilding, neither federation approached the Katrina crisis as a Katrina political moment. The Katrina disaster was less a natural disaster than a political and economic one, the result of years of neglect and of a neoliberal approach toward economics that drained the public sector of the resources necessary to defend the people of New Orleans. Katrina pointed up which segments of the city’s population counted with those in power and which ones were irrelevant.

Assuming agreement with this analysis, Katrina should have been (and should still be) the occasion for a direct assault on neoliberal economics and the racial and class bias evident in the entire crisis. By defining Katrina as a political moment, we suggest that the reconstruction period should be a time for organizing workers around the country to identify what failed on the Gulf Coast; who is to blame; and what must be done, not only to save the evacuees and other survivors but to rebuild the Gulf Coast on behalf of working people and people of color. Thus, it can be an organizing project necessitating the enlistment of state federations, central labor councils, and Jobs with Justice chapters, as well as their allies. This project must assist in organizing the evacuees and other survivors, particularly helping them create their own organizational vehicles to define their futures and the future of the Gulf Coast. It should be no less than a national campaign. But organized labor has opted for a different approach.

Another issue around which there should be a call for action is the forced redundancy of millions of workers. The union movement has largely ignored this development or treated it as a matter for United Way action. It has not, to any great extent, explored the possibility of organizing and uniting with the structurally unemployed. During the first stages of economic restructuring in the late 1970s and early 1980s, some unions, such as the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America and the United Auto Workers, experimented with various forms of unemployment councils. By and large, however, these projects did not last, though while in existence, they were able to service the immediate interests of former members displaced from jobs because of so-called deindustrialization.

The further growth in the number of the unemployed and the partially employed has sparked little interest in the union movement. Certain experiments, such as the AFL-CIO’s Working America (see below), speak by and large to workers who are not in collective-bargaining situations. Yet the union movement offers little to unemployed workers, particularly those who are structurally unemployed or underemployed. Work to aid these workers, to the extent to which anyone has taken it up, has largely fallen to worker-center-type organizations. Chuck Turner, a Boston city councilman and longtime progressive and activist, has convened supporters and allies to take up the specific question of organizing the unemployed. This work is precisely the type the central labor councils and state federations should be supporting. These organizations' failure to reach out to the unemployed and underemployed speaks to a separation within the working class that could lead to intraclass struggle as the battle unfolds for diminishing resources (health care, housing, education).
LABOR-COMMUNITY ALLIANCES VERSUS STRATEGIC POLITICAL BLOCS

Although forces on the left have nearly always sought to link labor and community struggles, not until the mid- to late 1980s did the notion of building labor-community alliances enter the mainstream. In general, such alliances have taken several forms: tactical alliances to tackle specific issues, mechanisms for asserting general plattitudes about the importance of the community (and sometimes, by implication, the importance of unifying with the aspirations of communities of color), or groups espousing a concept of "community unionism." Every so often, however, an alliance shows hints of a different approach.

At the tactical level, the most common approach has been for unions to seek the support of community-based organizations and institutions for organizing or contract campaigns. The examples of this approach are numerous. Local 26 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE, now UNITE HERE!) in Boston developed near-legendary contract campaigns in the 1980s in which it set out to win, and received, substantial community support. Under the inspiring leadership of the enigmatic Domenic Bozzotto, not only did Local 26 achieve leadership of the progressive wing of the union movement, but also its members came to be seen as champions of the community. Local 26 actively reached out to gain the support of community leaders, and it generally framed its struggles to emphasize social justice rather than put forth a litany of bargaining demands. In the late 1980s, Bozzotto broke new ground when he struggled for and won a rental and housing fund enabling Local 26 members to gain financing for housing deposits or down payments (this move, by the way, necessitated statutory changes that were themselves difficult to win but were eventually instituted). From this action came the Union Neighborhood Assistance Corporation, which works on issues of housing and predatory lending.

Most labor-community work by unions has never been as visionary as the work of Local 26, whose scope narrowed during the 1990s. Although positive results have come out of this work, such as Local 26/HERE or UNITE's successful organizing (with community support) of K-Mart distribution centers in Greensboro, North Carolina, alliances generally do not go beyond conducting outreach and perhaps creating a community advisory committee with lists of endorsers of a union effort. Upon completion of a campaign, they usually lie dormant until the next campaign.

The responsibility for addressing the difficulties in building union-community partnerships does not rest on unions alone. In the mid- to late 1980s, District 65 of the UAW embarked on an ambitious effort to organize child-care and human service centers in Massachusetts. Though the campaign had great vitality, it ran into very particular and peculiar resistance within communities of color, where many directors of nonprofit agencies saw the union as an antagonistic force. In an odd turnabout, agency directors (and personnel) who might be otherwise progressive (and in some cases left leaning) openly opposed unionization. This position seemed to reflect concerns about power and control in their respective agencies and their perception that unionization would threaten their power. Despite efforts by UAW's District 65 to build partnerships with a number of these directors and to focus on the benefits of establishing a common front to obtain greater funding for child-care and human service agencies in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, many of these directors balked. Their opposition to or coolness toward the idea of unionization weakened the organizing campaigns. Some agency directors played upon skepticism about the objectives of the union—even this historically progressive union—to undermine the notion that agency workers not only had a right to organize but that unionization could strengthen the hand of the community.

On the union side, some union-community initiatives have been positive exceptions to the usual ineffective alliances and are thus worthy of some attention. Such initiatives include Jobs with Justice; the Stamford, Connecticut, "Geo" organizing campaign; and Justice for Janitors (the SEIU effort to organize janitors). Jobs for Justice and Justice for Janitors have both been initiatives that focused on the rights of workers who are either already in unions or are in the process of unionizing.

Jobs with Justice, having emerged from the Kirkland years as a center of more advanced unionism, entered the Sweeney years with a question hanging over it. Given the Sweeney interest in revamping the central labor councils, did a need exist for an organization—JwJ—that took on many of the roles of a CLC? The Sweeney administration decided to support JwJ, though it never formally answered this question.

JwJ is a unique labor-community organization in that it is composed of labor activists who may or may not be in unions. Although some community-based organizations participate in JwJ and work alongside it, one cannot describe JwJ as a union-community coalition. This observation is not a criticism; it is merely a statement of fact.
areas. In other words, the program would pump up the Stamford model and focus on areas in which unions were conducting significant organizing efforts. This initiative, though quite vocally supported by the AFL-CIO’s executive vice president, Linda Chavez-Thompson, collapsed because of changes in the AFL-CIO’s Organizing Department in early 2000 and the strategic paralysis that befell the AFL-CIO after George W. Bush captured the White House later that year.

In the political arena, labor-community alliances have largely been tactical, with unions identifying and working for specific candidates but not gathering forces to pursue a longer-term strategic effort. In the early 1990s, some unions experimented with a program called Labor/Neighbor on the West Coast that sought to organize members for political action in their respective neighborhoods. This program was less about organizing communities than about building a union political organization in the communities. It could have been used much more widely, but the myopia of the union movement relegated it to election season, as is common for such projects, and prevented the long-term building of a political organization in the communities.6

A final form of community involvement is union participation in charity work, which is what many trade unionists believe community outreach to be. Two examples immediately come to mind. Every year, the AFL-CIO sponsors Martin Luther King Weekend, during which trade unionists gather—originally in Atlanta and later in a rotation among other cities in the South—both to commemorate the life and work of King and to participate in educational programs and community outreach programs. For example, some building trades unions do repair work in the community, in a one-day version of Habitat for Humanity’s homebuilding program. The leadership describes this work as a means of increasing the visibility of the union movement in the community as well as improving the image of the movement. As we have seen, the union response to the Katrina disaster has been much the same. Union members gathered food, clothing, and money to support the victims of the storm and organized volunteers to help the victims meet their immediate needs.

Though nothing is wrong with such charity efforts, they are either one-shot deals or short-term efforts, so they do not build movements. They can also come across as “photo ops” to improve a union’s image rather than as part of an overall initiative. Instead of strengthening the battle for social justice, they inadvertently reinforce the idea that the union movement is an outside force or institution that stands apart from the struggles that workers face every day.
We see a need for a different approach that addresses questions of both class and power. In this approach, labor-community is not the correct dichotomy. A better one would be union-community, but it, too, is not sufficient for a social justice framework. Workplace-community—designating a relationship between workplace-based and community-based organizations—is perhaps most useful. This distinction is important, but it is not the most important.

To the extent that labor speaks about matters of class, it should not see itself as separate from the community. The term labor should denote forms of organization with roots in the working class and with agendas that explicitly advance the class demands of the working class. In that sense, a community-based organization rooted in the working class (such as a workers' center) that addresses class-specific issues is a labor organization in the same way that a trade union is. To push the envelope a bit more, a trade union that addresses the interests of only one section of the working class (such as a white supremacist craft union) deserves the label labor organization less than does a community-based organization that assists the unemployed or the homeless.

In this view, labor organizations should set their sights on achieving power that enables them to advance the interests of working people. If one accepts this proposition, a genuine labor movement would advance the notion of a social-political bloc whose goal is to achieve power. This power goes beyond bargaining power—whether in a specific workplace or even within a specific industry—to confer political-economic power in society as a whole. This concept is not the same as the idea of limiting organized labor to supporting specific candidates that the leadership brings before it. Rather it calls for building strategic relationships between and within a specific workplace—whether in a specific workplace or even within a specific industry—to confer political-economic power in society as a whole. This concept is not the same as the idea of limiting organized labor to supporting specific candidates that the leadership brings before it. Rather it calls for building strategic relationships between and within a specific workplace—whether in a specific workplace or even within a specific industry—to confer political-economic power in society as a whole.

This approach essentially defies current trade union practices in forming alliances and taking political action. Indeed, it has the following central premise: if class struggle is not restricted to the workplace, then neither should unions be. The strategic conclusion is that unions must think in terms of organizing cities rather than simply organizing workplaces (or industries). And organizing cities is possible only if unions work with allies in metropolitan social-political blocs.

How, then, does one organize a city? The Stamford project gives a clue to the possibilities, yet it is merely a prototype. Organizing cities calls for practicing class politics: identifying individuals and forces within the working class that have sufficient common cause to unite. To borrow an idea raised by the South African Left, we must delineate the minimum bases for unity to accomplish a set of objectives that strengthen the power of the working class. This larger objective requires organizers to think very broadly about who needs to be in the same room to craft a strategic plan. Many efforts stumble on this step. Too often, unions and other progressive formations focus only on groups they happen to like working with, have a history of working with, and feel comfortable working with—rather than on who should be in the room if they are to accomplish their objectives.

Recent experiences of the Black Freedom Movement illustrate this point. In the aftermath of the Katrina disaster, confusion was rampant within the movement about the best way to respond to the catastrophe and its implications. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, under the then-new leadership of Bruce Gordon, convened a Black leadership meeting at Howard University in September 2005. The meeting turned into a gathering of the “usual suspects.” Though a very broad list of suggested participants had been offered (including a list by one of us, Bill Fletcher, Jr.) that incorporated not only the traditional Black leadership but also Black leftists of different stripes (including but not limited to nationalists and Pan-Africanists), meeting planners either ignored nontraditional forces or excluded them outright. They gave no reason for this exclusion, though one can guess that these forces were simply outside the leadership’s comfort zone. In the absence of the Left, the discussion focused more on the interests of the Black business community than on the need to build a movement to address the Katrina moment. In other words, any attempt to develop a comprehensive strategic orientation was impossible given the glaring absences in the room. Comfort, whether personal or organizational, overrode strategic necessity, limiting the ability of the conference to accomplish its goals. In a similar fashion, the trade union movement regularly finds ways to exclude the very people with whom it needs to work.

Therefore, the first step in building a progressive labor community social-political bloc is to gather the forces together. This process involves more than issuing an invitation. It calls for building trust among people and groups that may not feel they have a basis for trust or that may not have worked together before.

Within the working class are a number of relatively new organizations and movements associated with so-called workers’ centers, as well as other independent workers’ organizations. These groups are often
ignored by the established union movement, and some of them have written off the established movement as archaic. Yet many of these formations—for example, the northern Virginia–based Tenants & Workers United, the Miami Workers Center, the New York–based Chinese Staff and Workers’ Association, the Philadelphia Unemployment Project, the Boston–based City Life/Vida Urbana (CL/VU)—have deep roots within sections of the working class that are relatively untouched or ignored by official trade unionism. They are often the poorest of the working class, and in some cases, the most marginal. They rarely have much power in the workplace, attempting instead to have an impact at the community level. For the 88 percent of the U.S. workforce that is not in unions, these organizations offer a way to organize to advance their own interests. The organizations can also provide cultural and language bridges between communities that have been denied access to civic participation or traditional unions. This capability is particularly useful for workers’ centers established in immigrant communities of color. The centros provide a safe haven for working people seeking to develop skills for coping with civic society and for organizing for power in the community or in the workplace.

With the changes in the economy and the shift in the types of manufacturing and service industries, not to mention the increase in the number of the structurally unemployed, these groups’ work is all the more important. It offers an opportunity to forge a labor movement rather than simply a trade union movement.  

The nontraditional organizations above have established significant niches in various sections of the working class. Tenants & Workers United has developed significant work among largely Latino immigrants in northern Virginia; the Miami Workers Center has done important work among the African American poor in the highly segregated and repressive city of Miami; the Chinese Staff and Workers’ Association has long had a foothold in New York among Chinese restaurant workers; CAAV (founded as the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence) has a project to support domestic workers in New York City, a largely immigrant workforce; the Workplace Project in Long Island, New York, has organized immigrant workers and pursued many claims for back wages and reports of poor working conditions; and in Los Angeles, the Labor/Community Strategy Center (LCSC) works with the poorest sectors of the working class, initiating, for example, an unusual mass organization known as the Bus Riders Union to address inequities in transportation funding and services in Los Angeles County.

The second piece of this approach of organizing cities is to return to the notion of unionism as a force in pro–working-class economic development. Thus, it requires union leaders to think about the various struggles and demands of specific sections of the working class, such as the demand for affordable housing, as well as find ways to generate decent-paying jobs. The union movement can support this project in ways that were first described by economist-theorist Randy Barber in the book he co-authored with Jeremy Rifkin in 1978, *The North Shall Rise Again.* Barber and Rifkin suggest that unions direct vast pools of pension-fund money to promote economic development. The AFL-CIO has programs—such as the Housing Investment Trust—that can serve as allies in such work. The main point, though, is to advance unionism as one tool for strengthening the working class, its living standard, and its power.

The principal vehicles for advancing such class politics could be coalitions that we call working people’s assemblies. The idea is a simple one: to gather together working-class–based organizations that have an interest—objective and subjective—in formulating a working people’s agenda. The agenda would need to begin at the local level (city or county) before expanding outward. It would need to focus on the issues particular to working-class people in the target area, identifying the key issues as well as strategies for addressing them. Such strategies could combine self-help initiatives, such as industrial cooperatives and housing cooperatives, with efforts to take programmatic demands to government, through mass action and electoral politics. For example:

- **Industrial cooperatives.** The modern trade union movement has largely ignored the possibilities of industrial cooperatives. In the nineteenth century, co-ops were a key part of movements such as the Knights of Labor. The working people’s assembly in an area might either create a committee to initiate a cooperative (conducting the research, raising the capital, identifying markets, hiring a labor force) or pressure a government body—municipal, county, or state—to start a quasi-public economic development venture (particularly in geographic areas or parts of the economy that the private sector has abandoned).

- **Electoral challenges.** Contrary to the practice of many leftist and progressive initiatives, a basis of unity for working people’s assemblies should not be participants’ attitude toward a particular established political party (or, for that matter, toward a minor political party). Each assembly—which would constitute a united front—would need
to establish the appropriate organizational vehicle for implementing its decisions. Upon adopting a program, the assembly might begin to construct a political organization that can follow through on the agenda. We believe that this type of organization would likely be a neo-Rainbow effort. In other words, it would not be a political party but would be a political organization capable of running candidates for office either within one of the existing parties (most likely the Democrats) or in an independent effort. Such an endeavor would go beyond efforts such as the Labor/Neighbor program of the San Francisco Central Labor Council. Rather than create a union political operation, it would create a pro-working-class political organization.

Organizing cities, then, would be a comprehensive, multilevel effort. Rather than have one union concentrate on multiple workplaces or launch a multiunion organizing effort (such as the AFL-CIO’s failed 1980s Houston organizing project), this approach would bring together labor forces for a multiyear effort focused on a set of clear strategic objectives. The three-decades-old community-based organization City Life/Vida Urbana illustrates some of the elements of this approach. The organization has been working to win collective bargaining for tenants in the city of Boston. Under its banner, tenants’ associations would have a right to bargain on behalf of their members. Through a formation called Community Labor United, efforts have been under way to bring together union activists and City Life/Vida Urbana activists. Some unions, for instance, have supported the CL/VU legislation on tenant collective bargaining. Some unions, such as SEIU, have reached out to CL/VU to gain its support in organizing efforts (such as campaigns to organize security guards), and discussions have taken place about areas in which the unions could provide reciprocal support.

As important as these initiatives are, conceptualizing this work within a working people’s assembly could raise its strategic ambitions and level of unity. CL/VU’s work, then, could be part of a joint concentration of progressive forces in the Boston metropolitan area. The assembly could call on other organizations, including trade unions, to provide technical, financial, moral, and personnel support to its efforts. Those efforts could parallel multiunion organizing efforts within the Boston metropolitan area. Rather than have the timing of these efforts appear to be a coincidence, participants in the working people’s assembly could share demands and show real (rather than symbolic) solidarity.

To create a strategic bloc, working-class organizations need to see that their interests, objectives, and identities coalesce. Rather than have each struggle move ahead on its own, the bloc would aim to build coherence among progressive forces, thereby transforming a series of tactical alliances into a social movement. The ultimate aim, of course, would be to construct a nationwide strategic bloc. To achieve this transformation, a neo-Rainbow-type formation would be essential. The movement must be grounded within the working class. The question is whether unions could play more than an ancillary role in building such a movement.

**RACE AND GENDER**

The post–World War II union movement has largely been unable to develop a politics that truly addresses issues of race, gender, and labor, apart from making superficial or rhetorical gestures. A few exceptions exist, such as several Left-led unions purged by the CIO during the Cold War era, in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Union leaders who emerged during the era of the Vietnam War, the civil rights movements of people of color, and the women’s movement have tended to be more sensitive to issues of race and gender than have their predecessors, but this sensitivity has not necessarily or mainly translated into consistently antiracist and antisexist practice. We suggest that the union movement’s acceptance of the Gompers paradigm, combined with anticommunism, has limited its ability to understand not only issues of race and gender but, more generally, the need for consistent democracy.

As we have seen, race and gender are not sideshows to the alleged real story of class (which itself is too often understood in narrow terms). The oppression of women is thousands of years old and certainly precedes capitalism. Race is a sociopolitical construct created in the aftermath of the English invasion of Ireland that later took on notions of color with the European invasion of the Western Hemisphere and the introduction of the African slave trade. The tendency to define people by race largely stems from a drive to establish and maintain social control. Both race and gender have been successfully incorporated into and influenced by the development of modern capitalism. Thus, capitalism would not exist without issues of race and gender. Though these issues may play out differently in different places, they are part and parcel of the system.

If this conclusion is correct, and we obviously believe that it is, the consequences for a union movement are profound. A prominent white
union leader told one of us that s/he does not know what an antiracist practice is or why s/he should advance such an idea. This comment, which the leader claimed was an effort to play the devil's advocate, nevertheless spoke to a troublesome inclination. Even union leaders who have emerged from earlier struggles and count themselves as progressives tend to collapse all struggles into economics and to believe—incorrectly—that the United States has no working class but rather a series of identities fighting for recognition (and often fighting only against the specific form of oppression they face).

Divisions within the working class are linked to larger social divisions. Divisions on racial lines are not simply divisions within the working class but a component of a larger set of societal racial divisions. As a result, people's social and political identification tends to cross class lines because of the all-round nature of special oppression. For example, African American and Chicano workers might identify with other things African American and Chicano, respectively, because of the scale and scope of racial oppression. Women workers might identify with issues that affect women who are not of the working class (though this process is complicated).

This does not mean, crudely, that "everyone has it rough." Rather, it means that class cannot be understood in a linear fashion. One cannot, for instance, inoculate oneself against racism and sexism or overlook the experiences that one has had as a member of a group that has known racial or gender oppression. Such experiences inform one's existence in general but also the way in which one perceives other components of reality—in this case, class.

In turn, oppressions such as racism and sexism become battlegrounds to unite workers in the larger challenge for power, or they become battlegrounds in the intraclass struggle over resources (given the manner in which capitalism allocates the social surplus). They also potentially become battlegrounds in the reshaping of society.

Because class consciousness is directly affected by how one understands and acts upon other oppressions, such as race and gender, not to mention economic oppression, a linear or overly economic view of class can create an illusion of unity. In other words, reducing workers' experience to their economic reality in the workplace or, for that matter, in the street can conceal the impact of other oppressions on their consciousness and reality. Workers can come to believe that by ignoring those other realities, they can all march off together. Such a view, as we have seen throughout U.S. history, is disastrous. The union movement largely ignores the fact that capitalism engenders competition and that the system promotes and absorbs divisions such as race and gender as a means of maintaining social control. The leadership of organized labor fails to confront this reality not because of stupidity but because of awareness of the consequences of addressing it; leaders have a deep-seated fear that addressing the all-too-apparent divisions will antagonize whites or men.
If the working class is already divided, then the strategic question for the union movement and all labor activists must be how to bring about the highest degree of unity. The twenty-first-century union movement not only must reject the Gompers paradigm of anticommunism and empire but must embrace consistent democracy.

To the white union leader who does not know what an antiracist practice looks like, one could answer as follows: antiracist practices are those that champion consistent democracy. In other words, in an antiracist movement, a union leader would rise to leadership by championing struggles that go beyond one industry or sector and, for that matter, that look beyond economics. Fighting for consistent democracy is essential to build the strategic political blocs we describe above.

Unions’ struggle for consistent democracy could take several forms:

- active struggles against racist and sexist employer practices in the workplace, such as differentials in working conditions, pay, access to employment, and promotions
- opposition to religious persecution, such as that against Muslims since 9/11
- support for on-site child care or employer-paid child-care programs
- support for federal funding of education coupled with educational reform (taking this function out of the hands of the states)
- support for national health care
- support for secure voting rights and for reforms in voting procedures to open up the process
- support for affordable housing
- opposition to the persecution of immigrants and support for the rights of immigrants
- advocacy of a democratic foreign policy

Many other possibilities for action could join this list. Some unions, particularly Left-lead unions, have historically made a practice of advancing such demands. Nevertheless, the pull toward a narrow Gompers-style emphasis in economics is strong and has led many a union leader to assume that economic demands are the surest way of establishing unity.

The union movement’s approach to race and gender has at least two other elements, one external and the other internal. Externally, unions have failed to make common cause with independent social movements, many of which demonstrate that race and gender cross class bound-aries. Many legitimate multiclass movements of people of color and of women have focused on demands and issues that are both specific to their groups (and their fights for freedom) and central to the pursuit of genuine democracy. These movements have often been ahead of organized labor in advancing social agendas. Thus, an interesting sort of tension can develop, in part because many union leaders believe they stand at the helm of the most advanced progressive social movements. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, the civil rights stage of the Black Freedom Movement regularly advanced demands for democracy that outclassed nearly everything emerging from the trade union movement.

Even more important, the demands raised by these independent social movements can be at odds with the demands and practices of U.S. trade unions. When, for instance, Black, Puerto Rican, and Chinese workers and their community-based allies demanded the desegregation of the building trades unions in New York from the early 1960s onward, they were essentially making a demand for democracy and, by extension, a demand for a different sort of trade union movement. Unions should have broken ranks at this point, and progressives should have led their unions to support the communities calling for desegregation. Such support should have been both moral and material. Rarely, however, did unions step forward in this way. Instead, the bulk of the union movement, in the name of “labor solidarity,” either remained conveniently silent or found ways to ally with the racist building trades. This struggle or set of struggles would have been legitimate grounds for a split within organized labor.

Another occasion on which a union failed to see potential in an external movement was the legendary and notorious (and devastating) 1968 teachers’ strike in New York. In this classic example, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT; an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers)—then under the leadership of Albert Shanker, a right-wing social democrat—took a hard-line position against efforts by the African American and Puerto Rican communities to gain community control of schools. Narrowing its view to issues of seniority and ignoring the racial discrimination that had kept African American and Latino teachers out of the school system for years, the UFT struck, in effect, against the communities of color, against the freedom movements. In many respects, relations between communities of color and the UFT (specifically Black-Jewish relations) have not fully recovered from this battle. The bulk of organized labor failed to break ranks from the UFT and failed to appreciate the significance of the African American and Puerto Rican demands for community control of the schools.
Therefore, the unions must reconceptualize their relationships with other progressive social movements. The demands that these movements generally raise are not tangential to economic demands but rather speak directly to the question of consistent democracy.

The internal element of unions’ engagement with issues of race and gender is whether they have the will or the mechanisms to recognize race and gender oppression. The practice of U.S. trade unionism since the mid-1980s has illustrated the tension between diversity and inclusion. In large part because of the struggles of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the traditional trade union leadership faced new pressure to open its ranks to women and people of color. Demands for greater diversity came from organized caucuses or formations, such as the Coalition of Labor Union Women, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and the USWA Ad Hoc Committee. In addition, pressure came from the outside, including but not limited to lawsuits accusing unions of exclusion. In either case, during the 1990s, the trade union leadership and staffs began to become more diverse.

In the recent past, some backsliding has occurred. One reason is that many of the staff positions that went to women and people of color did not confer sufficient power or allow these staffers to exert influence on the real decision makers. Though the balance sheet differs from union to union, staff members of color have rarely found themselves in positions of real power and authority. Those who have had power have largely been those in unions run by leaders of color. Certainly, these individuals in largely white settings were not necessarily figureheads. Rather the power was often drained from their positions once they assumed them.

Most often, women and people of color have difficulty gaining access to powerful staff positions in the first place. A case in point is the staff position of national/international organizing director. As of late 2006, only one national/international union had a Black organizing director. How can this be possible in the beginning of the twenty-first century?

Elected positions are a bit more complicated because, by definition, elected leaders are chosen by a membership. Yet the formality of this selection process should not confuse anyone. First, many “elected” leaders within the union movement gain their position through the assistance of someone currently occupying that position or of someone else in authority. The recent history of the Communications Workers of America is instructive. Progressive leader Larry Cohen assumed the presidency of CWA after years of anticipation, and a shakeup followed, along with the emergence of new leaders. The new leadership grouping was almost all white. Despite the opportunity to recruit and develop leaders of color, the culture of the organization apparently took over, changing the cast of characters in various positions but not the types of people usually promoted into these jobs. In some unions, the situation is quite blatant and embarrassing, with the promotion of family members creating an almost monarchical succession.

A complicated issue is at play in matters related to elected union office, one that haunts all electoral politics in the United States: how many whites are willing to vote for individuals of color, and how many people of both genders are willing to vote for women? The union movement has an uneven record in this area, speaking volumes about the lack of internal education about inclusion.

A twenty-first-century union movement must recognize several facts:

- The working class is divided and must be united, but unity cannot be based solely on common economic demands and must join people together in a struggle for consistent democracy.
- The union movement has an obligation to build and support working-class leaders of color and women leaders who can be influential within their respective independent social movements. It must recognize that such individuals have independent power and constituency bases and thus must have independent authority.
- Diversity is important, but inclusion is fundamental. Thus, union leadership—at both the staff and elected levels—must mirror the membership. Women and staff members of color must also have opportunities to hold positions of real authority, not just the positions they have traditionally held, such as civil rights and women’s director positions. Full inclusion is not only a moral position but also a pragmatic necessity: whites cannot know the experiences of workers of color any more than men can know the experiences of women. Whites can be allies of people of color, and men can be allies of women, but they must do so in a spirit of partnership rather than condescension.
- The movement’s organizing strategy must incorporate and coordinate with social movements of color, incorporate sectors that have large numbers of women and people of color, and validate sectors that are primarily centers for women workers, and therefore receive short shrift, such as domestic work, home care, and child care.