



the magazine of the
Democratic Socialists
of America



Labor Issue:

Organizing Globally
The New Poverty
Black Labor

plus—

DSA in action:

U.S. Social Forum
Economic Justice Agenda
Socialist Summer School



Random Thoughts on the Passing of Another Labor Day

Melvyn Dubofsky

Now that another Labor Day has come and gone, it seems a good time to assess the state of workers and unions in the twenty-first century United States. Any such assessment must register greater liabilities than assets. Union membership as a proportion of the employed labor force has fallen to levels unseen since the the depression of 1893-97, the deepest trough in union density prior to the present. Wage and salary earners have fallen on hard times during the past six years as real wages and earnings stagnated. Workers have held their own materially only by laboring longer or sending more family members into the labor force. Along with stagnation of wages, such protections as health insurance, guaranteed pension benefits and job security have all been weakened or vanished. All this while the Haves accumulated greater income and wealth.

It seems as if I am reliving the 1980s, when, at numerous conferences and symposia, I compared the 1980s to the 1920s. Now (1984-88) as then (1920s), I would tell the audience, an enfeebled labor movement had lost members and influence as its appeal waned in the golden glow emanating from the new “welfare capitalism” with a conscience (or Ronald Reagan’s “morning in America”). Now as then, I would observe, public policy intensified the growth of social and economic inequality. And I would close my talks and comments with the words uttered by the labor economist and president-elect of the American Economic Association, George Barnett, in 1932. “I see no reason to believe,” he declared, “that American trade unionism will so revolutionize itself within a short period as to become in the next decade a more potent social influence than it has been in the past decade.”

Between Barnett’s words to the American Economic Association in 1932 and the revival of the labor movement and worker militancy, only two years intervened. In the two decades that have elapsed since I compared the 1980s to the 1920s, far less has changed. We have experienced a series of pseudo- or non-events, epiphenomena that have drawn attention and publicity yet altered little. In 1995 a palace revolt brought new leaders to command the AFL-CIO, labor insurgents who promised to revitalize a stagnant labor movement, to devote greater resources to unionizing the unorganized, and to raise union density. In 1997 sympathetic progressives and leftists formed Scholars, Artists and Writers for Social Justice (SAWSJ) in an effort to foster support for the John Sweeney-led AFL-CIO. Commenting on the new

alliance between unionists and intellectuals, the sociologist Daniel Bell noted, “for the intellectuals it’s a lot of wishful thinking.... The real test will be whether labor has the ability to expand its numbers. Simply becoming more rhetorical and becoming more active politically is not in and of itself enough.” How right he was!

The Sweeney AFL-CIO and its supporters failed to staunch the persistent decline in union density. So badly did they fail that by 2005 another group of union insurgents within AFL-CIO arose to challenge the Sweeney leadership. Led by Andrew Stern of the Service Employees International Union and Bruce Raynor and John Wilhelm of UNITE-HERE (all three Ivy League graduates), the new rebels demanded that Sweeney devote the bulk of AFL-CIO financial resources to organizing and to restructuring the labor movement around a small core of mega-unions. When Sweeney and his allies rebuffed such demands, Stern, et al., did a collective John L. Lewis, walking out of AFL-CIO to create the Change-to-Win (CtW) coalition. Unfortunately, Stern has been no Lewis, nor has CtW resembled the CIO in its impact on workers and the labor movement. In the two plus years since its founding, CtW, like Sweeney and SAWSJ, has failed to reverse the persistent decline of union density and influence.

To understand why that is so, we must separate evanescent events from long-term patterns. The decline in union density and influence has occurred relentlessly for more than half a century. Moreover, it has resulted from fundamental changes in the structure of the economy, the composition of the labor force, and shifting patterns of national and global economics. Productive, industrial, or manual labor, once the core area of union strength, has diminished as service and sales labor, rarely sources of union strength, have grown exponentially. A labor force and its union members once composed predominantly of white, male, U.S.-born workers has changed to a labor force diversified by gender, ethnicity (race), and place of birth (immigrants, legal and illegal). The prototypical single male primary breadwinner of the affluent post-war decades has been a disappearing species reintegrated into a family-wage economy where multiple wage-earners, includ-

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Georgia on My (Socialist) Mind

By Frank Llewellyn, DSA National Director

DSA's National Convention in Atlanta this November 9-11 is shaping up to be the best-attended convention in six years. Senator Bernie Sanders' participation in the convention has helped, but as important is the recognition that we are on the cusp of new period in American politics. The project of the Right is, for the moment, exhausted, and Americans are looking for new solutions to the social and economic problems that face the country. They desperately want an end to the war and increasingly understand that the economic policies of the Right have failed to lift their living standards.

The political debate in 2008 and the political struggles in the aftermath of the Democratic victory that most political observers expect will be about what kind of reforms will be implemented. These struggles will be very difficult, especially for the kind of far-reaching solutions that we favor, but they will be vastly different from the struggles we have endured for much of the last thirty years.

There is a role for us in this political debate that will build the movement for social and economic justice and contribute to winning some important battles. There is no doubt in my mind that on national health care, immigration reform, and labor law reform, three critically important issues whose solutions have the potential to substantially change the political landscape and significantly improve the lives of millions of Americans, our perspective is particularly relevant.

The discussions that we will have at this convention will determine to a large degree how we relate to these vital issues and the social movements organized around them. There is still time for DSA members who want to participate in the convention to sign up by emailing me at fllewellyn@dsausa.org. You can also visit the DSA Website, www.dsausa.org, to get copies of material that will be discussed at the convention. While at the web site, you can sign up for News from DSA, which will provide daily convention reports and is the most immediate source for reports on DSA activity year round. Finally, it is possible to sign up for DSAMember, DSA's loosely moderated discussion list that provides a space for members to exchange views on DSA activity.

Of course, we can't take the outcome of the next election for granted. The Republicans will try every dirty trick in their playbook in order to stay in control of the presidency and limit Democratic Party gains in the House and Senate. Nor can we assume that a Democratic victory is a certain road to real change. But the Democrats, should they win, will have to respond to the constituencies that voted for them. That it is why it is critically important that the Left fashion an agenda for change that can mobilize the social movements and elect as many progressives as possible to fight for it.

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Democratic Socialists of America share a vision of a humane international social order based on equitable distribution of resources, meaningful work, a healthy environment, sustainable growth, gender and racial equality, and non-oppressive relationships. Equality, solidarity, and democracy can only be achieved through international political and social cooperation aimed at ensuring that economic institutions benefit all people. We are dedicated to building truly international social movements – of unionists, environmentalists, feminists, and people of color – which together can elevate global justice over brutalizing global competition.

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Rediscovering Poverty?

By Martha Ackelsberg

Almost 60 years ago, in what has now become a classic article on “Citizenship and Social Class,” the British sociologist T.H. Marshall asked whether a commitment to political equality was compatible with significant social inequalities. He suggested that meaningful citizenship entailed, beyond access to equal justice, or even to the vote, “a claim to be admitted to a share in the social heritage,” a possibility that, until then, had not been available to members of the working class. Marshall’s article offered both an analysis of the development of citizenship in England and a call to action, arguing that the achievement of citizenship for all would require significant societal investments. As he put it, modern citizenship demanded “the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society.” Equal citizenship, that is, entailed not just political rights, but a social obligation to provide access to education and to more-than-minimal social provision.

Marshall’s views, of course, did not catch on in the U.S. We never developed the kind of social welfare commitments and programs that became standard in England and throughout Western Europe in the years following World War II. We have tended to assume that political equality is a reality in the U.S., even in the face of substantial social and economic inequalities. And the presidency of George W. Bush, following on Bill Clinton’s “welfare reform,” has severely undermined what little safety net we had.

The situation may be changing. In the past year or so, for the first time since Lyndon Johnson declared War on Poverty in 1964, poverty has begun to reappear in our national political discourse. To be sure, it is far from a “mainstream” concern: among the major Democratic presidential contenders, only John Edwards has made it a centerpiece of his campaign; and the Republicans are not discussing it at all. Yet, similar calls have been appearing in a variety of venues. To cite just a few examples: 1) In June of 2006 – the same month during which Edwards’ address to the National Press Club called for eliminating poverty within 30 years – Sojourners/Call to Renewal, a religious coalition, announced “A Covenant for a New America: From Poverty to Opportunity,” advocating major national action to significantly reduce poverty; 2) later that year, Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York City established a Center for Economic Opportunity to support experimental programs addressing poverty (New York’s being only

one of many city-level poverty initiatives); 3) this past January, the US Conference of Mayors Taskforce on Poverty,



Work and Opportunity, chaired by Antonio Villaraigosa of Los Angeles, issued its report, “Repairing the Economic Ladder: A Transformative Investment Strategy to Reduce Poverty and Expand America’s Middle Class”: and 4) in April, the Center for American

Progress released its report, “From Poverty to Prosperity: A National Strategy to Cut Poverty in Half.”

Beyond these, we could point to state-level commissions, targets, and other initiatives in Connecticut, California, Louisiana, Minnesota, North Carolina, Maine and Vermont; and to city-sponsored plans in Milwaukee, Fresno, and Miami, among others.

There is not space here to analyze these in detail. It is interesting, however, to note what they have in common: the picture they paint of the state of poverty and inequality in the US, and the types of approaches and strategies they propose. While their emphases differ, most begin with the fact that in 2005 (the last year for which we have full census data) over 37 million Americans – roughly 12.9 percent of the population – were living in poverty as defined by federal guidelines. They further point out that these guidelines vastly understate the numbers of those who do not meet Marshall’s standard of “shar[ing] to the full in the social heritage and liv[ing] the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society.” Indeed, while the US uses an absolute standard created in the 1960s and adjusted for inflation, most European countries use a relative standard (households receiving less than 50 percent of the median household income are considered poor). If poverty in the US were measured by a similar standard, roughly 20 percent of the population would be so classified. The percentage of people living in poverty has risen since 2000 (after having fallen during the 1990s), and overall inequality – and, in particular, the gap between the very wealthy and the rest – has risen dramatically.

What is especially interesting is the way these reports discuss poverty. All note that members of minority communities (especially African Americans and Latinos) are disproportionately poor. All devote considerable attention to the disgrace of child poverty in the US: for example, among the

28 most developed nations, we are second only to Mexico in the percentage of children living in poverty. While all call our attention to the moral dimensions of these facts, it is striking that they tend to emphasize the economic and social consequences for the non-poor. Thus, for example, the Villaraigosa report emphasizes the implications of childhood poverty for the health and well-being of future workers: those who live in poverty as children are less likely to complete high school, more likely to become involved with the penal system, less likely to find decently paying jobs, less likely to have health insurance, and more likely to become dependent on public assistance as they age. It is almost as if they assume that non-poor Americans too-easily dismiss appeals to morality or social conscience, but might respond more forthrightly if they see that their own long-term economic interests are affected.

Related to a concern for children and future workers is a similar attention to, and concern about, quality education, at all levels from pre-K through college. These reports all call for more, and more affordable, early-childhood education programs and significant investment in (and improvement of) public education, especially programs to decrease drop-out rates. Many advocate creating investment accounts for children, available to them to use for higher education when they turn 18. All call for greater support of higher education, e.g., raising the level of Pell grants, to make it possible for more children from poor families to attend college. (As it is now, children from low-income families are much less likely to attend college than are children of similar ability from high-income families.)

Quite significantly, despite the specific attention to child poverty and the goal, in the words of one, of “making work work,” the reports effectively ignore the profoundly gendered dimensions of poverty. They emphasize that a substantial proportion of those living in poverty are members of families with at least one worker who is working full time, but not earning enough to support himself or herself and his or her family. But they neglect to mention that women (and their children) are disproportionately represented among the poor. While they acknowledge that many of the poor are folks who cannot work, either because of age or disability, these calls to action focus overwhelmingly on the [male] “working poor,” or the poor who could work, presumably in an effort to deflect attention away from the almost mythical image of the stay-at-home “welfare queen.” They call for increases to the minimum wage, protection for unionization, increasing and broadening eligibility for EITC, and making quality child-care more readily and easily available. They do not name gender discrimination in the workplace or the gender

stratification of the labor market. And they neither address the miserable stipends paid to those receiving TANF nor question whether the policy of forcing mothers of young children into the low-wage labor force is good for them, their children, or the economy. All pay requisite homage to the value and importance of supporting marriage and stable two-parent (presumably heterosexual) family structures.

Many of them propose targets – halving poverty in 10 years (Center for American Progress), eliminating it in 30 years (John Edwards), or halving child poverty in 10 years (Sojourners/Call to Renewal). As the Center for Law and Social Policy notes, having specific targets can be valuable: they provide benchmarks and allow for assessments of how successful the programs are. (Tony Blair’s plan to end child poverty in Britain by 2020 and to cut it by one fourth by 2005 fell short of its first goal, even though child poverty did drop by 20 percent during this period; but, interestingly, rather than readjusting the goal, the British government is working to determine how it can speed up the process to achieve greater success in the future. I do not remember a case where US policy-makers responded in quite this way to their own failure to meet goals!)

Finally, all – including the ambitious plan from the Center for American Progress – while calling for stepped-up public investment and government programs to address poverty and inequality, also call for public-private partnerships to achieve their ends. Such is the central principle of Bloomberg’s plan for New York City.. The language of each of these proposals seems essentially to accept a rather limited vision of what government programs can do, and to insist that public-private partnerships (in employment programs, support for schools, etc.) will be the key to effectively addressing poverty in the years to come.

Why now? No doubt, one major factor is Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. Although the continuing devastation and slow recovery of the Gulf Coast is no longer on the front pages of the newspapers, the images of the thousands stranded in the Superdome, and the devastation that the Hurricane wrought, did awaken many people to what John Edwards refers to as the “two Americas.” Poverty and inequality did make it onto the public agenda, at least for a few weeks, and some of these studies are clearly responding to that reawakened awareness. Growing economic inequality is also beginning to make its way into more general consciousness.

And, of course, there is the coming presidential election. The 2006 mid-term elections demonstrated that the Republicans are vulnerable on economic issues and that levels of anxiety about the economy are high, even among those

who would once have been thought to be “solidly middle class.” Thus, even though Edwards was the first Democratic candidate to make poverty a central campaign issue, Obama’s presidential website now lists “poverty” among his “issues.” Clinton’s website has a focus on “strengthening the middle class,” in which she addresses issues of inequality, while calling virtually everyone who works “middle class”; and many of the other Democratic candidates address at least some of the issues – jobs, minimum wages, the quality of public education, access to higher education – highlighted by these reports.

Most of these discussions take the form of what Frances Fox Piven has termed “shopping lists” – setting out a variety of goals, and proposing strategies and policies to meet them. Most of the goals are good ones; few readers of *Democratic Left* would likely argue with them. But none of them focuses on how to achieve political support for these goals. And none addresses seriously the structural dimensions of poverty.

Choices for Black labor

By Bill Fletcher, Jr.

I came of age politically in the middle of the Black Power movement. Within the ranks of organized labor, both the Black Power movement and the Anti-Vietnam War movement had a significant impact through the mid-1970s. Caucuses were being formed to challenge the bureaucratic leaderships of many unions. Wild-cat strikes were taking place in workplaces around the country. And in some locales, independent unions were being established where workers had concluded that the established union movement was incapable of making any significant changes to address the needs and demands of rank and file workers. At the national level, the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists emerged as a major voice arguing that organized labor needed to take a new and different look at the Black worker, a look and engagement that was based on the need for respect and equality.

As we enter the 21st century, Black labor is in disarray. Within the ranks of organized labor, the various institutions that have often spoken on its behalf have ossified. Black caucuses in various unions have stepped back from challenging and pushing the union leaderships and instead have in all too many cases degenerated into social clubs or step-ladders for individuals to get positions in the union structure. While there are greater numbers of Black staff and, in some cases, elected leaders, there is an emphasis on acceptability – to the leadership of organized labor – within the ranks of the movement, rather than an emphasis on challenge and struggle.

With nodding references to growing inequality, they tend to treat poverty as a problem of the poor, not of the economic and political systems that create and maintain vast inequalities of wealth, power, and opportunity. True, reforms such as higher minimum wages, better schools, and more equal access to higher education would be beneficial. But until we can move beyond solutions meant to modify individual behaviors and toward programs addressing basic structures of power and privilege (including relations of both race and gender), we will not be able seriously to reduce poverty, let alone reach Marshall’s goal of enabling everyone to participate in the social heritage and live a life consistent with the “standards prevailing in society.”

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How this situation evolved would be the material around which a book could be written. Suffice to say that the economic crisis affecting Black America, a crisis that became very evident in the mid-1970s, cut the ground underneath a



major portion of the Black working class. Combined with political attacks on Black America by the Right, we went on the defensive. In organized labor, the declining percentage of workers organized in unions, along with the brutal climate

built up during the Ronald Reagan years, worsened the conditions under which struggle could take place.

Yet in my humble opinion what was particularly lost by Black labor leaders was vision. The vision that was articulated beginning in the 1930s with the growth of the National Negro Congress and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and advanced in the 1950s with the National Negro Labor Council and, later, by the A. Philip Randolph-led Negro American Labor Council, and in the 1970s with the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, justifiably emphasized the inclusion of Black workers at all levels of the union movement. In some quarters, particularly within the Black labor Left,

there were equally efforts to emphasize a broader approach by organized labor towards issues facing all workers as well as the need for organized labor to be a clear and consistent ally of the Black Freedom Movement.

By the early 1980s and with changes in the leadership of much of organized labor, the hostility that had often been felt by Black labor shifted. This did not mean that Black labor was consistently embraced, but it meant that there was at least a public recognition of the Black worker and his/her importance. Attacks on the CBTU, for instance, diminished, if not disappeared. By the early 1990s, some unions had even gone as far as officially supporting or sponsoring Black caucuses.

Yet something was lost. The “fire” that had been felt through organizations such as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (and its affiliates), or the United Community Construction Workers in Boston, Massachusetts, was largely absent. Yes, Black labor could sit at the table, but still missing was what Black labor represents as a movement. Thus, Black labor became an appendage to organized labor rather than the catalyst for union transformation. Black labor has been among labor’s most important and dedicated shock troops; we remain the most pro-union of any ethnic/racial group; and we are disproportionately active in our unions. This, however, does not translate into a coalescing, let alone fusion, of the organized labor and the Black Freedom Movements.

In the absence of a 21st century vision from Black labor leadership, despair and counterproductive views can and have emerged. The despair can be felt in the environment. Visit Detroit, which was once a major center for Black labor – and organized labor as a whole – and one feels as if one is looking at a post-industrial scenario, a city with the equivalent of no comprehensive economic development strategy and where the Black working class is suffering as well as disintegrating as an effective force. Nationally, the prevailing emphasis, even among many younger activists, is on *individual solutions* to problems that are mainly collective. Within the Black working class there is a less of a sense that unions are the instruments to deal with the larger problems facing Black America. This does not mean that unions are disregarded, but it does mean that there is little sense that they can or do have an expansive role.

Counterproductive views are the other challenge. Gaining considerable attention over the last few years has been the growth of anti-immigrant sentiment within Black America, including within the Black working class. The fact that much of this sentiment has been actively fueled by white, right-wing anti-immigrant groups is secondary to the fact that the fear of competition and displacement on the part of the Black

working class has made it susceptible to ‘nativist’ arguments. Black labor leadership has, for the most part, failed to engage and rigorously challenge this sentiment with much more than platitudes. As the Black working class faces continued battering, the immigrant – documented and/or undocumented – becomes, for many, the target of convenience for our anger. Rather than understanding the nature of the problem we face as lying within capitalism itself and the search by business for cheaper and more vulnerable workforces, the immigrant becomes the safe and convenient enemy of the moment.

Black labor has historically played an interesting role, something akin to the irritant in the oyster that brings forward a pearl. Whether we organized independent unions when we were refused entry into the AFL or when we and Chicanos became decisive supporters of a new labor movement, as in the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in the 1930s and 1940s, Black labor has little history of passivity. The time has come for Black labor to step back into that role of irritant to the oyster, but with a 21st century frame of reference.

The choices facing Black labor begin with vision and they are linked to organization. The Black Freedom Movement has always had at its core the struggle to expand the terms of democracy beyond statutes and formalities, instead in the direction of social transformation. This was true whether the battle was against slavery, against Jim Crow segregation, or against de facto segregation. To this should be added that the Black Freedom Movement has nearly always been an essential ally for other efforts to expand democracy and oppose injustice and inequality. This core – the fight for consistent democracy/opposition to injustice and inequality – must remain the guiding principles for Black labor and its challenge to organized labor today. The implications are quite profound in that what is being asked of Black labor – as a contingent of both organized labor and the Black Freedom Movement – is to push for a *reconstructed and redefined labor movement that is emphasizing social transformation*.

What does this mean concretely? Among other things it begins with taking great risks. Too many white labor leaders believe that they have been sufficiently inoculated such that they can speak for Black labor. Let us flip the script. Black labor must not only speak for the Black worker, but Black labor must be the voice speaking on behalf of all workers. This means not restricting ourselves to arguments about the percentage of Blacks on staff in unions, but rather challenging the basic program of organized labor including, but not limited, to the failure of organized labor to have a plan for organizing Black workers.

Let me offer a few suggestions:

- If the saying "...as goes the South, so goes the nation..." remains correct – and I would suggest that it is – then organized labor must unionize the South. To do that the Black worker, and the Black community more generally, are essential. Workers are more likely to vote in a progressive direction if they are unionized, thus, insofar as the South has limited unionization, the chance for developing progressive politics in the USA as a whole is encumbered.
- To organize the South, the Black community must be central. This does not mean that the African American is the only constituency. Whites, along with the rising numbers of Latino and African immigrants in the South are critical. But the historically rooted African American community becomes essential if unionization is to win. That means unionization must be a community affair. One need only remember the 1968 sanitation workers struggle in Memphis, TN, or the 1969 Charleston, South Carolina hospital workers struggle to get a sense of possibilities. Yet, such struggles were nearly 40 years ago, and neither organized labor nor the Black Freedom Movement have built upon such examples on scale in terms of continuing activity (note: the current struggle of the Smithfield workers in North Carolina as well as the alliance of Black Workers for Justice and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, also in North Carolina, are examples of more recent attempts to create a new framework that builds upon the possibilities evident in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Whether these will set a pattern for a new practice or instead be anomalies only time and struggle will determine).
- My decades old friend, Dr. Steven Pitts from UC-Berkeley Labor Center, has made a mission of emphasizing the fight for good jobs as key for Black America. His fundamental point is that jobs can be transformed through unionization. Jobs, such as longshore, which had been among the most oppressive and underpaid, underwent a conversion – of sorts – through unionization. Jobs do not necessarily begin high-wage. They can, however, become high wage through worker organization. This means that organized labor must have a program to organize economically depressed regions – such as our central cities – to transform the jobs. This, again, becomes a community affair. This point must be emphasized particularly in light of the Black neo-conservative view that holds, in essence, that any

job that is created, no matter how poorly it pays, is a good job for a depressed community. Thus, we are told, that the Black community should be grateful for whatever it can get. Rather than accepting poverty level employment, the self-organization of workers through unions can transform such jobs into respectable, higher-wage employment. This was true of longshore and trucking in the past. One is witnessing a similar renovation in the janitorial industry after years of re-unionizing the work after employers had restructured the industry, destroyed the unions and workers that had been in place, and brought in lower waged workers. The fact that this situation could and was turned around spoke volumes to the need for unionization and activism. Struggle and organization, in other words, are an alternative to begging and acceptance.

- With structural unemployment seeming to grow each day with workers dropping off the rolls finding no work, an effort to organize the unemployed becomes paramount. This means building institutions which both help to support – economically and psychologically – unemployed workers, but also to give them a vehicle to place demands on the government and corporations for jobs or income. At a point where worker productivity continues to rise but is disconnected from wages, we need to insist that business owes a social payback to our communities – including tax policies that lift the burden from the middle income and place them on those who are running away with profits.

A final point, at least for now, is this. None of this happens in the absence of a Black labor organization that is prepared to shake the table. This is a mission that befalls the younger generation of Black labor leaders, but it is a mission that must be supported by veteran leaders. Each caucus and organization of Black workers must ask itself how it is concretely addressing the crisis facing the Black working class. Each grouping of Black workers must ask how our unions are concretely addressing the crisis facing the Black working class. Together we must be bold enough to suggest that by addressing the crisis of the Black working class we are indeed challenging not only the structure, mission and direction of organized labor but the current neo-liberal direction of the USA.

Bill Fletcher, Jr., an editor of the Black Commentator, where this article originally appeared, is a labor and international writer and activist, and the immediate past president of TransAfrica Forum.

Global Labor Organizing in Theory and Practice

By Paul Garver

In May 1962, UAW President Walter Reuther announced a plan to organize autoworkers in 14 countries because the American automobile industry had begun sourcing parts from international suppliers.

In May 2007, representatives of auto unions from eight countries meeting at the UAW headquarters in Detroit agreed to form an *ad hoc* global auto sector organizing working group to share information on companies and union densities, develop strategic organizing targets and coordinate solidarity. UAW organizing director Terry Thurman expressed the UAW's eagerness to "move beyond symbolic gestures of solidarity and develop joint strategies to combat the global assault on workers' rights."

That 45 years separate Reuther's announcement and the Detroit meeting shows how difficult it is to implement a real practice of labor organizing across borders. It will likely take more years before the mutual commitments auto unions made in Detroit result in an actual organizing program for the global automobile industry with dedicated staff and resources.

Recent developments suggest that American unions are beginning to think more consistently about what an enormous and sophisticated task it will be to organize large numbers of new workers in the globalizing economy.

In April, the USW announced a tentative merger agreement with the British union Unite, itself a new merger of the Transport & General Workers Union and Amicus. The unions will set up a merger exploration committee to lay down a foundation for a legal merger. The new union would represent more than 3.4 million members in the U.S., Canada, the UK and Ireland.

Clearly, the political and organizational obstacles to such an international merger remain enormous, and it is not evident that even a successful merger will achieve the synergies needed to free up resources for large-scale organizing campaigns. But the ambitious vision shown by the leaders of the three unions is welcome, and the experiment worth trying.

The AFL-CIO will host a "Global Organizing Summit" at the National Labor College on December 10 to 11, 2007, "to discuss global strategies to help workers join unions." CWA President Larry Cohen, who chairs the AFL-CIO Organizing Committee, points out that the workers' right to organize and

bargain "is an issue everywhere, but a crisis here."

The "Summit" is being sponsored by the "Council of Global Unions," which includes the International Trade Union Confederation (the recently unified global umbrella organization of national labor centers in 153 countries), the ten Global Union Federations (GUFs; formerly called International Trade Secretariats) and the Trade Union Advisory Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Unions throughout the world are worried about declining union membership in the USA, and also recognize the need to develop large-scale organizing programs in their own countries.

Neoliberal capitalist globalization has wreaked havoc on union membership in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, whereas in the U.S., collective bargaining was largely limited to the workplace level and right-wing political parties deliberately targeted unions for destruction. Even in Nordic and Northern

New union organizing in countries where transnationals are expanding their operations not only increases overall union density in these companies, but creates an incentive for central global management to deal with global union structures in a more honest fashion.

European countries, where union density had increased

through the mid-1990s (because centralized bargaining structures and relatively strong social democratic political influence counteracted the negative impact of capitalist-dominated globalization), reductions in manufacturing employment began to cut the ranks of unionized workers within the last decade. Furthermore, the dynamic and militant union movements of Brazil, South Africa and South Korea are now encountering the same sophisticated management methods, such as outsourcing, technological change and employment of more temporary and casual workers, that are threatening unions throughout the world.

In this international context, innovative organizing tactics like those the American labor movement has been forced to learn have become more interesting to labor activists in other countries. Is it possible that the historic antagonisms within the international labor movement between socialists, communists and Christians, and between "bread-and-butter" and social movement unionists can be partially transcended, through common organizational priorities, to organize new union members and increase union density within global companies?

Some of the 10 GUFs are already experimenting with innovative organizing strategies that target global companies

and industries in their respective sectors. Stephen Lerner, director of SEIU's property services division, theorizes that organizers in other "world cities" can emulate the successes in organizing low-wage, low-status, racially diverse and often immigrant workers in Los Angeles or Houston through sophisticated union campaigns and coalition-building. Global security companies, food catering companies and cleaning contractors operate throughout the world, employing vulnerable workforces that are similarly racially diverse and often made of recent immigrants. Since this sector, though internationalized, is not geographically mobile, it cannot escape by closing factories and moving elsewhere.

SEIU is committing staff and financial resources to international organizing in these sectors. The global property services industry falls within the jurisdiction of the Union Network International (UNI), through which SEIU has provided staff organizers and trainers to support union organizing drives in several countries. One effort that has achieved some success is the Transport & General Workers' organizing drive at Canary Wharf in London. SEIU and UNITE-HERE have also cooperated with the International Union of Foodworkers (IUF) to create a similar program for the global food catering sector, which has already succeeded in opening up parts of the global Sodexo company to union organizing efforts in the U.S.

International organizing in the more mobile industrial sector presents additional obstacles, but these can be overcome by creative strategies. For instance, low-wage, super-exploited migrant workers increasingly staff food-manufacturing sectors such as meat and poultry processing. The UFCW organizing drive at the giant Smithfield pork-processing plant in North Carolina now integrates many aspects of a comprehensive campaign, including support for undocumented immigrants, civil rights and church mobilizing, and customer awareness efforts at supermarkets in cities as far away as Boston. The international component includes working through the IUF to mobilize support among unionized Smithfield workers in France and Poland.

I have also described (in the latest issue of *Labor Studies Journal*) an ambitious effort by the IUF to organize units of global companies in the food and drinks manufacturing sector (notably Coca-Cola and Nestlé) in key emerging countries such as Russia and Pakistan. New union organizing in countries where transnationals are expanding their operations not only increases overall union density in these companies, but creates an incentive for central global management to deal with global union structures in a more honest fashion.

Organizing new members is a crucial, but not the exclu-

sive, priority of the global labor movement. A parallel task is to help create a political coalition that has the capability of challenging the capitalist-dominated globalization process. Although the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has achieved a certain level of organizational unity and generally adheres to a broadly consensual social-democratic/democratic-socialist set of political and organizational principles, it has not yet demonstrated the ability to coordinate joint labor actions other than policy statements and lobbying at international organizations.

It is unrealistic to expect that the ITUC and the GUFs, even cooperating as a "Council of Global Unions," can compensate in the overall political sphere for the absence of a coherent democratic socialist movement at the global level and in most countries. Other prospective movement allies are not well articulated at the global level (although such organizations as Amnesty International, Greenpeace International and the Global Social Forums exist). Reversing the tide of capitalist-dominated globalization will first require building grassroots coalitions between unions and other progressive organizations at the local and national levels, and building from these to the global level. Building these grassroots coalitions is key not only to labor's political revival, but to organizing workers in the world cities (cf. *Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds: Local Solidarity in a Global Economy*, edited by Turner and Cornfield and published by Cornell University Press).

There are troubling indications that repressive states and employers are beginning to fear international labor organizing efforts and are moving to curtail key links. Fremantle Trust, a "not-for-profit" employer of home health care workers in London, is trying to suppress a support campaign for its workers by using the UK's draconian libel laws to threaten LabourStart's internet service provider. The Putin government has refused to renew the visas of American labor activists Elizabeth Vladeck and Irene Stevenson, who were helping Russian workers to organize unions. Socialists and other progressives throughout the world must always be quick to defend the basic human right to freedom of association at the international level as well as at the national.

Paul Garver recently retired as coordinator for transnational union activities in the International Union of Foodworkers (IUF) food and drinks sector, based in Geneva. Before that he worked for the SEIU in Pittsburgh, where he was an active member of DSA and its predecessor, the New American Movement.

YDS unites: Socialist Summer School and YDS Convention

By David Duhalde, YDS Organizer

The 2007 Socialist Summer School was held at Local 1199 SEIU Martin Luther King, Jr. Labor Center in New York City in August. This was the most promising and exciting gathering in my four years as a member of the Young Democratic Socialists, with triple the attendance of the previous gathering. The demographics reflected the growth and vibrancy of YDS, with, in addition to the genuinely multi-class, multi-racial milieu, chapter leaders from as far away as Nevada and Colorado and delegations from Red states such as Texas and Kansas.

There was group discussion about YDS' participation in the United States Social Forum and the importance of building social movements, though the weekend's emphasis was on internal socialist education and the practical combination of ideals with productive activism. Workshops focused on the Iraq War, the role of trade union labor, electoral politics, gender issues, and race. All attendees attended an interactive workshop on democratic socialism, with each workshop concluding with discussion on how to take our values and put them into action.

The new YDS membership has a strong sense of unity. Chapters no longer want to be a loose collection of socialist clubs but seek to coordinate national actions to give weight to our work. The continuation of our National Immigrant Rights Project and the adoption of a Student Debt Campaign

emphasize our role as the sane democratic socialist voice in coalition politics. At this convention, YDS voted to create a Coalitions Coordinator position to emphasize the importance of us being a working partner in student and youth politics. Chapter members already have been planning actions with the National Youth and Student Peace Coalition and for the Student-Labor Week of Action.

This unity also translated into the collective responsibility to make our organization better. The new YDS is placing special emphasis on building a group that people of color, working-class, women, and queer communities want to be part of. Anti-Racism and Feminist Issues Committees have been reestablished, each with a specific brief to be visible in their work. The new Coordinating Committee, with a respective 50% representation of women, people of color and working-class members, shall continuously support the efforts of productive anti-oppression work within YDS.

YDS cadre appreciate not only our new activist home, but also the need for a socialist project such as YDS. From the Pink Tide in Latin America to our own domestic backlash against the neo-liberal agenda, there is an important role for democratic socialists today. A revived YDS will continue the tradition of being the voice for the left of the possible in the streets, on campuses, and in our communities.

Talking About Economic Justice

In midsummer, Boston DSA paired a barbecue combined with presentation of DSA's Economic Justice Agenda. David Knuttunen and Susan Davidoff hosted the event for a group of about 20, many new to DSA, with David's excellent and compelling powerpoint presentation of the Agenda, David simultaneously serving as barbecue chef. The Economic Justice Agenda will soon be available on the DSA website.

The purpose of the Agenda is to shift the left from a defensive to a proactive position and to find a balance between the pragmatic and the visionary. David summarized the four main pillars of the agenda: adequate government revenue, public provision of needed services, viable social movements and a healthy labor movement, and fair trade agreements. He added his personal suggestions for additions to the agenda: more on the environment as a public good and the need to build strong domestic economies in the developing world (which also addresses immigration). David suggested adding housing, transportation, and infrastructure to the document, specifically citing investment in infrastructure that allows for greater productivity as a way to address the need for fewer workers to support more retirees in the future.

Attendees suggested investigating how to frame the issues, using the John Edwards phrase "work over wealth." They asked if the document could be used to interrogate candidates, which might be a way to reach out to other, larger organizations. The need to address issues related to the roles of the World Bank and IMF, as well as other global finance institutions, was raised. Someone invoked Michael Moore's *Sicko*, and privatization in general, as reference points for outreach.

Immigration got particular attention, with discussion of a long-range solution such as the abrogation of NAFTA, which might allow more farmers in Mexico to make a living growing corn, instead of dying in the deserts of Arizona or New Mexico, where the private prison industry seems to be reaping a windfall from the desperation of poor, displaced Mexicans. Barbecue attendees shared a view of the importance of speaking to American workers about immigrant desperation for jobs, and connecting that to their own domestic economic situation by situating the villains as corporate institutions and their K Street lobbies, in cahoots with global financial actors, rather than the immigrants themselves.

A successful event. And fun. Hey, comrades, try this at home!

DSA at the U.S. Social Forum



clockwise from bottom left: panelists Jose LaLuz (DSA Vice Chair), Emahunn Campbell (YDS anti-racism coordinator), Frances Fox Piven (DSA Honorary Chair); YDS workshop; YDS delegation.

YDS Stands up for the Jena Six

By Kenny Grand

September 2007 marked the 50th anniversary of the Little Rock Central High integration, a major step in ending government-sanctioned apartheid. Unfortunately, institutional and cultural racism are still far from extinct. Although the classroom is officially integrated, we still self-segregate out of force of habit. Go to any student union in the South: one will see cultural apartheid.

Usually, we find it convenient to ignore the problem – but the truth has a way of breaking through to people and snapping them out of their haze of apathy and complacency. Most recently, Americans faced the mistreatment of six young black men in the small town of Jena.

Mychal Bell (who was 16 at the time of the fight that put him in jail) was to be sentenced on September 20th, so grassroots organizations from around the nation geared up for a rally in Jena. Here in Conway, the local NAACP, UCA Young Democratic Socialists, the Demand Justice Panel, Students for the Propagation of Black Culture, and the Young Democrats worked together to organize a few carpools, staging areas, and a local solidarity demonstration. We had coalition meetings and did press releases in preparation for the local student walkout and march. Similar actions were planned in a number of other universities and with numerous organizations from as far away from Jena as West Virginia and New Jersey.

We pulled into the local baseball park, past the Confederate flag-emblazoned Dixie Youth billboards. From the time we climbed out of the car, we could feel the other demonstrators' positive energy that would be the theme for most of the day. A bus brought us right to the head of a column led by Al Sharpton, and thousands of people filed up the hill in a

column through the residential area. Teamsters, NAACPers, Rainbow Coalition folk, kids, church members, Uhuru SaSa, people carrying canes and cradles – all marched in pride, determination and solidarity, waving red, black, and green liberation banners and chanting, “No Justice, No Peace! No Justice, No Peace!” As intense as the message was, as serious as the problem, all was done with an air of festivity. The police and the Red Cross were were a constant aid instead of a steady source of antagonism.

Although the march officially started at eight, columns of people continued to file in even at 1 p.m. A few private citizens opened up their houses to marchers.

Passed-around buckets managed to quickly generate the \$6,000 needed to post bail for Mychal Bell, but the D.A. stepped in and denied his bail. The bail level assumed Bell wouldn't be able to muster up enough money to be released. The five other boys spent up to eight months in jail. Most people do 90-100 days for assault, which is why it is not unreasonable to call for clemency in this case.

Hopefully, American citizens won't be fickle and let this pass out of their memories when it drops out of vogue. Things on par with this and worse happen all of the time. Hopefully, people will continue to call for self-determination and justice, will continue to do broad coalition work and will actively and confidently confront racial injustice and call for an end to cultural apartheid. We've got a million miles to go, it seems, but we can't forget to keep movin'.

Kenny Grand is National Organizing Facilitator of the Young Democratic Socialists (YDS), DSA's youth section.



For thirty-five years, nearly a full decade longer than DSA's existence, *Democratic Left* has covered the work of progressives, including grassroots activism in many movements for social and economic justice. Articles have not been limited to the U.S. but have covered important struggles wherever they have occurred. *Democratic Left* is a magazine of the left firmly rooted in both immediate struggles for reform and the principles of democratic socialism.

Beginning as *Michael Harrington's Newsletter of the Democratic Left*, then just the *Newsletter of the Democratic Left*, and finally *Democratic Left*, the magazine has been both an independent voice for the broad left and the magazine that DSA members get four times a year.

We are asking our friends to join our celebration of half a lifetime's work by making special contributions to support the magazine. For just a dollar or two or five or ten for each year of our publication, or just a hundred bucks, your name can appear in the pages of *Democratic Left*. And to make sure we receive the maximum bang for your buck, this campaign will only be conducted on line and in the pages of *Democratic Left*, saving us the cost of printing, postage and phone calls. Every contributor to this campaign will be listed in *Democratic Left* in the first issue published after we receive his/her contribution. The next issue will be published at the end of December, but don't wait too long or you will have wait until the Spring issue to see your name in *Democratic Left*; in order to publish your name in the next issue we need to receive your contribution by this December 10.

So here's the deal: Pick the level of the contribution that you want to make, and mail a check to the office (75 Maiden Lane, Suite 505, New York, NY 10038, make check payable to DSA) or visit DSA website, www.dsausa.org and where you can use your MASTERCARD or VISA to make an on-line contribution; if mailing a check be sure to write "35th anniversary celebration" on the check. You can choose from the following contribution levels:

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Your special contribution will help us to meet the challenge created by the disproportionate postal increase that Bush and his friends have imposed on small independent publications like *Democratic Left*, *In These Times* and *The Nation* and help us to improve the publication!

Thank you in advance for your consideration and support.

In solidarity,

National Director

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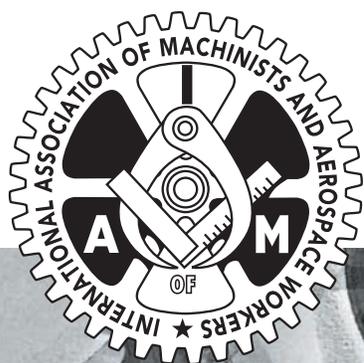
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OPENING

Labor Today

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ing working mothers, are necessary in order to maintain a decent standard of living. Over the past 50 years, employment and social security have diminished, health insurance has become less available and less generous, and defined benefit pensions have become the exception rather than the rule.

To compound labor's difficulties within the United States, population and economic growth shifted from union strongholds in the Northeast and upper Middle West to the non-union and anti-union South and Southwest. Globally, the United States lost market share in high value-added industrial production to better-designed products from European and East Asian competitors, and in low added-value goods (textiles, clothing, mass-produced electronics parts) to developing nations with surpluses of cheap labor – places to which U.S. manufacturers also off-shored their production facilities at the expense of domestic jobs.

The one exception to the rule of diminishing job security, dissolving health and pension benefits and plummeting union membership has been among employees in the federal government and in those states traditionally receptive to unionism and that have legitimated union representation and collective bargaining for public employees. Absent these, employment insecurity has become the rule and the ability to maintain an adequate standard of living a never-ending struggle. The rela-

tive compression of earnings and incomes during the first half of the post-World War II years has given way to a widening gap between the top 1 percent of income-earners and everybody else, especially the bottom 40 percent of wage-earners. Never has economic inequality been so enormous.

How do we reverse the dynamics that over a half century have decimated unions, produced insecurity and misery for millions of working people, and created the most inegalitarian society since the late nineteenth century's "age of excess?" We certainly don't want another great depression or world war, cataclysms today more likely to lead to authoritarian movements and governments than to New Deal social democracies. George Barnett's prophecy of 1932 seems quite apropos to the world of the year 2007. Neither the Sweeney palace coup nor the Stern secession has revitalized a dormant labor movement as Lewis and CIO did in 1935-37.

So what is to be done? How do we raise the collective "we" above the singular "me"? How do we reweave the fabric of a labor movement shredded by immigration, gender, race, and conflicting cultures? Here I can offer no answers, only ask the readers of *Democratic Left* to suggest their own alternatives, to debate among themselves how to reverse fifty years of debilitating historical change, and to thrust their answers into the national political and ideological arenas.

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