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The Case for an Eclectic Mass Movement

Cedric de Leon¹ 

Keywords

trade unions, unorganized workers, worker centers, neoliberalism, democracy, capitalism

We live in a moment of political crisis. Workers in the United States and elsewhere are questioning the promise of neoliberalism, which held that our shared prosperity hinged on a free market unencumbered by state regulation and unions. Like other crises, ours is one of political heterogeneity. In recent years, we have seen workers turn to unions, democratic socialism, and even neo-fascist organizations for answers. Assuming that this moment will not last forever and that one political project will eventually prevail, the labor movement must make a strategic choice now. Among the approaches currently competing for organized labor's energy and resources, I argue that the most promising strategy is to play a leading role in an eclectic but coordinated movement focused on building economic democracy. The public sector organizing wave of the 1960s, the last major upsurge in U.S. labor history, provides an example of this approach, combining the grassroots energy of independent mass organizations and the delayed but critical support of organized labor. The initial clash and ensuing solidarity between the Black and white factions of the U.S. working class in that period offer important lessons for our own time. The first is that dominant modes of capital accumulation such as Fordism and neoliberalism, especially in the U.S. context, entail racial and class compromises. Accordingly, when workers withdraw their consent to be ruled, they form new organizations to confront and challenge these compromises. Second, though new groups may seem threatening or ineffectual, they reflect workers' organic response to the crisis and help to attune the movement to the challenges that matter

most to them. It is this fresh eclecticism that fuels organizational innovation and upsurge.

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The Last Upsurge: Civil Rights and the Public Sector Wave

The strategic mastermind behind the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was Bayard Rustin. A Black trade unionist and sometime radical, Rustin worked as assistant to A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the Negro American Labor Council (NALC). NALC was an independent Black labor federation formed in 1959 to integrate the labor movement. It was NALC that hired Rustin to plan the march and served as treasurer for the event. Due largely to Black labor's efforts but also in part to UAW President Walter Reuther, head of the industrial department of the AFL-CIO, some 200,000 people occupied the National Mall in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963—40,000 of them union members. Indeed, the March on Washington was led and organized as much by

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Black trade unionists as it was by either the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s own Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).¹

Within the world of organized labor, the march capped an escalating standoff between NALC, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), and the AFL-CIO. The conflict emerged out of the ILGWU's practice of segregating Black and Puerto Rican members into the worst jobs, and then evolved into the AFL's unwillingness to punish local and state affiliates for excluding Black people from meetings, membership, and elected office. The widespread persistence of Jim Crow unionism, combined with accelerating deindustrialization, created a crisis of unemployment in the Black community. This was corroborated by a series of blockbuster reports from the United States Commission on Civil Rights, the New York City Youth Board, and others, all with the same message: that racial segregation in the labor movement concentrated Blacks in menial occupations and the growing ranks of the unemployed. Accordingly, in the years just prior to the march, NALC, the NAACP, SNCC, and the SCLC called to account AFL-CIO President George Meany for not doing enough to curb employment discrimination.²

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom generated such immense pressure on the labor movement that in the months following, the AFL-CIO and its affiliates agreed to do more to fight racial discrimination in their ranks. Even the state federations of Alabama and Mississippi lobbied in favor of a civil rights bill passed in the U.S. House of Representatives and resisted attempts by Senate Dixiecrats and Republicans to dilute the legislation. By June 1964, the so-called Negro-Labor alliance was confident enough to threaten a national one-day strike on the anniversary of the march if the Senate blocked the bill's passage. The Senate would pass the Civil Rights Act that same month.³

The Negro-Labor alliance of the 1960s would also help to touch off a massive wave of public sector organizing. For example, the

Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike of 1968, where Dr. King would be assassinated, encouraged other Black public sector workers to organize in Florida, Virginia, and South Carolina. In 1962, about 10 percent of public employees belonged to unions; by 1973, 23 percent did. The public sector wave, along with that of industrial unionism in the 1930s, remain what sociologist Dan Clawson called the iconic "upsurges" of U.S. labor history.⁴

The Rise of Neoliberalism

Just as Black workers began to get their fair share of the New Deal order in terms of access to employment, higher wages, and health insurance; however, political elites from both major parties abandoned their erstwhile alliances with organized labor and the civil rights movement. The mode of capital accumulation following the Great Depression required not only extensive state expenditures to mitigate unemployment and facilitate mass consumption (e.g., social security, unemployment insurance), but also state subsidies and other supports to capital (e.g., infrastructural spending, the Federal Housing Administration, Reconstruction Finance Corporation) to facilitate accumulation. Within this framework, the welfare state used jobs and anti-poverty programs to absorb the cost of subsidizing Black workers, who were discriminated against in the labor market. The state was able to balance these competing needs when economic growth and therefore state revenues remained high throughout the 1960s, but it became increasingly difficult to do so as growth slowed and revenue shrank. Indeed, the rate of profit fell by over half from a postwar high of 9.2 percent in 1966 to 4.4 percent in 1974.⁵

Conflicts arose between the white and Black factions of the working class over whether, and if so how, the state should pay for these subsidies to capital, organized labor, and minoritized workers. Should it raise taxes on private property and corporate profits or through regressive taxes on household income? In the electoral arena, Richard Nixon's campaign on behalf of the so-called "silent majority" to end subsidies to Black workers precipitated a mass defection of white union households from the Democrats to the Republicans. Indeed, Gallup found that

President Nixon carried a majority of the labor vote in 1972. Racial tensions also erupted in union halls across the country over organized labor's alliance with capital. These took the form of independent Black labor organizations and insurgent leadership slates. For instance, a rank-and-file insurgency—League of Revolutionary Black Workers—emerged in Detroit to challenge the apparent collaboration between the United Auto Workers' white leadership and the Big Three automakers.⁶

Pressure increased in that moment to choose one of two paths: an authoritarian path that imposed austerity on the working class in service to capital or a path that sought to redistribute wealth downward, creating shared prosperity. The state chose capital and allowed the dramatic expansion of corporate power through deregulation, declining corporate taxation, and the weakening of labor laws. Under President Ronald Reagan in particular the state gave capital *carte blanche* to bust unions and outsource production overseas. Aiding in the growth of public support for this agenda was a working class divided by the politics of racial fear and resentment. The latter included an assault on the welfare state and so-called "law and order" initiatives that intensified policing and mass incarceration especially in communities of color.

Confronting the Crisis of Neoliberalism

Having dominated policy making on the right and left for nearly a half-century, neoliberalism is now itself experiencing a political crisis. A host of popular movements and parties around the globe and across the political spectrum have begun to fill the void that neoliberalism once occupied.⁷

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On the left in particular, the Black Freedom Struggle and labor movement are again on the move and beginning to coalesce. The Movement

for Black Lives, which emerged in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2011 and culminated in the summer of 2020 with the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, comprised the largest wave of public protests in American history. Though it appears in the mass media to be a single-issue campaign, on the ground the movement evinces a class character and has become increasingly aligned with the labor movement. Black Lives Matter (BLM) has continuously demanded an increase to the minimum wage, for example. The Fight for \$15 has been working in coalition with the Movement for Black Lives since the killing of Michael Brown in 2014. Moreover, strikes and contract campaigns among public sector workers in Durham, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Chicago, and elsewhere have put racism and policing at the center of their struggles. Unprecedented campaigns in the hotel and restaurant industry, Amazon, and Starbucks have similarly foregrounded the intersecting inequalities of race, class, gender, and immigrant rights.

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Given the heterogeneous movement ecology of the left, the question before us is not exactly "what is to be done?" but more specifically, whether this eclectic movement should adopt a singular, overarching approach to the crisis or embrace this organic heterogeneity.

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In my view, organized labor must not only expand its own organizing, but also dedicate

more resources and power to support the eclectic organizations that are now emerging to meet the crisis, including alt-labor organizations and new formations like the Amazon Labor Union. The reasons for this are two-fold. The first is a pressing structural matter, namely, that we have approximately 140 million unorganized workers to organize, and the movement must use every ounce of organizational capacity to reach those workers. Unions tend to be active in sectors of formal employment, for example, whereas worker centers and alt-labor organizations like Make the Road, the Restaurant Opportunities Center, and various ride-share campaigns are relatively more active in the informal sector where precarious and irregular employment prevail.⁸

... [W]orkers are challenging both rising economic inequality and the system's cruel disregard for racial justice, gender equity, and climate change.

A second reason to support a variety of organizations with disparate points of focus is that workers are challenging *both* rising economic inequality *and* the system's cruel disregard for racial justice, gender equity, and climate change. On these issues, there has been a promising give-and-take between organized labor and allied organizations. With respect to police violence, unions have tended to follow the lead of the Movement for Black Lives. For example, the U.S. Department of Justice had been investigating the Seattle police department for the unwarranted use of force since 2011, but it was only after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 that the Seattle Central Labor Council excommunicated that city's police union. On the other hand, the labor movement has politicized workers who are local leaders in the Movement for Black Lives. In another instance, Marcia Howard, who has helped to maintain the occupation of George Floyd Square in Minneapolis, became active in her union, the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, and was recently elected executive vice president after helping to

organize a successful strike in the two years since the 2020 uprising.

Tactically building an eclectic mass movement means three things. To begin, organizing should continue to take place through diverse types of organizations, including unions, worker centers, third parties like the Democratic Socialists of America, and community organizations. Next, unions must work with these allies systematically as one mass movement. By this I mean working in coalition (as unions often do) but organizing systematically across fields of activism around a shared vision. This kind of mass mobilization would include:

- Identifying people who can lead workers in their respective sectors,
- Assessing the members and grantees of these organizations on structure tests using a shared database, and
- Setting benchmarks for how many workers labor and community leaders plan to organize in six months, one year, and, five years.

As an example, Community Labor United in Boston brings together unions and community groups in working class communities like Lynn, Massachusetts for "Summits for the Public Good." Coalitions then organize on a ten-year timeline for the adoption of progressive policies like environmental justice, affordable childcare, and improved public transit. Third, to get this operation off the ground, a group of early adopters consisting of progressive unions and alt-labor groups must recruit the leaders of our eclectic movement to join in common struggle. This will require gatherings like those organized by labor centers; local, state, and regional conventions; and an innovative social media strategy that can put movement leaders in conversation with one another. The goal here is to build trust, get buy-in, and work together.

But if our tactics entail systematizing eclectic mass mobilization, what is the overall strategic objective and vision? Though our tactics are meant to organize millions of workers, including the poor and unemployed, our strategic objective must be to offer our own alternative to inspire unorganized workers and in doing so

compete with neoliberalism and the far right for the hearts and minds of working people. I am speaking here of building a new hegemonic bloc with labor in the lead due to unions' already existing resources and infrastructure. In my view, that alternative agenda is economic democracy.

... [O]ur strategic objective must be to offer our own alternative to inspire unorganized workers; ... that alternative agenda is economic democracy.

Economic democracy is the idea that none of us can be free unless all of us—especially the most marginalized—have power in the workplace and are key stakeholders in the economy. While there is no substitute in the workplace for strong unions that can force the boss to pay higher wages and shift control of the shop floor to the workers, other policies can help further democratize the economy—like public ownership of all utilities, worker representation on company boards, the sharing of profits through “inclusive ownership funds” that would pay dividends to workers, and participatory budgeting in which local communities get to decide how to allocate public money. The passage of these policies, in turn, will require the reform of our political system including the expansion of the right to vote and constitutional reforms to expand democracy.

In order to work, economic democracy must also be an inclusive idea, one that blends the insights of Black feminism and industrial democracy. The Combahee River Collective famously stated that centering the struggles and revolutionary potential of Black women is not to dismiss other forms of marginalization. Rather, it means that if a mass movement works to liberate Black women, who are triply oppressed by race, gender, and class, then the movement is in a position to liberate everyone who might be singly or double oppressed. By contrast, organizing from the opposite direction—that is, to start with straight white working-class men as the U.S. labor movement has done historically—runs the risk of abandoning

those workers who are at the very bottom of the labor market and jeopardizing the broad coalition necessary to achieve economic democracy.

Such liberation necessarily entails industrial democracy. In a non-union setting, the worker is an at-will employee and is meant to check his or her rights at the office door. Unions are at their best when they forge what Elaine Bernard, executive director of the Work-Life Program at Harvard Law School, calls “democratic communities of interest” through strikes, direct action, and collective bargaining. These everyday practices prevent the boss and capital writ large from putting their interests before those of workers.

At this point one might raise two interrelated objections: many people do not believe in economic democracy, and even if they did, how would you get all of these groups to fight for it? To the first objection, we do not in fact know whether people believe in economic democracy, because the labor movement has not organized around it or put it forward as its agenda. To the degree that we have related data, they are inconclusive. On the one hand, we have electoral returns which suggest that some percentage of white working-class people voted for Donald Trump. On the other hand, we have data that tell a different story: that public support for unions is at its highest point since 1965; that half of millennials express a preference for socialism over capitalism; and that there has been a 58 percent increase in petitions for National Labor Relations Board elections in 2022.⁹ In short, we will not know whether people believe in economic democracy unless we organize.

To the second objection, building a broad-based coalition of unions and other organizations is not a foreign concept to organized labor. Indeed, as organizer and political commentator Jane McAlevey and advocates of Bargaining for the Common Good convincingly show, the labor movement is at its best when unions and allied partners work together to organize entire communities. What I am suggesting is that the movement systematize these efforts at the state-wide, regional, and national levels, assess the organizational strength of coalition partners,

and attempt to make progress toward collective benchmarks as one mass movement.

We are confronted with a once-in-a-generation opportunity, in which politics-as-usual is no longer acceptable to wide swaths of the American public. It is incumbent on the labor movement to step into the breach now and unite our many organizations behind a common vision. Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph did this in their own way and time. They pushed a seemingly impregnable bureaucracy to a position of interracial solidarity and touched off the last major upsurge in U.S. labor history. The labor movement can do so again, as long as it organizes systematically and along the racial and class fault lines that define our current crisis.


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