

# Class, Race and Corporate Power

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Volume 5  
Issue 3 *U.S. Labor and Social Justice*

Article 2

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2017

## Fighting Racism as the First Order of Business: Lessons from a Marxist-inspired Union Organizing Experience

Meizhu Lui  
meizhului@gmail.com

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### Recommended Citation

Lui, Meizhu (2017) "Fighting Racism as the First Order of Business: Lessons from a Marxist-inspired Union Organizing Experience," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol5/iss3/2>

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# Fighting Racism as the First Order of Business: Lessons from a Marxist-inspired Union Organizing Experience

## **Abstract**

The question as to what must be done to build the power and unity of the working class *as a whole* cannot continue to sit on the back burner. Across the globe, it is socialists who are the clearest about the clash between classes as the driver of change. Until an inclusive vision that understands the preferential option for people of color takes root in the working class, capitalists will continue to be successful at dividing workers through racism.

## **Keywords**

Racism, Organized Labor, Organizing, Social Justice

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Meizhu Lui is a life-long “professional troublemaker.” Now retired, she has been a labor activist, community organizer, Director of United for a Fair Economy, and Program Director for the Closing the Racial Wealth Gap Initiative at the Insight Center for Community Economic Development. She is the co-author of *The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide*, and has written articles included in *The Wealth Inequality Reader*, *Inequality Matters* and *10 Excellent Reasons Not to Hate Taxes*, as well as other research papers. A member of Freedom Road Socialist Organization / Organización Socialista del Camino para la Libertad, her views foregrounding working class people of color have been presented in diverse media sources including *The Washington Post*, CNN, C-Span, NPR, politico.com, and globalpolicyTV.com.

## US Unions' Embrace of White Supremacy

As either a union or community activist, the only guidance one needs to *push* the moral arc toward justice—and it does not *bend* in that direction automatically—is to always keep this question in the forefront: “What must be done to build the power and unity of the working class as a whole?”

In the US, in a workplace with or without a union, progress toward justice can be achieved when the workers recognize that divisions by race, nationality, or ethnicity not only cannot be tolerated, but must consciously and consistently be named, acted upon, and eradicated. The US capitalist class has, since the introduction of enslaved Africans, as the main labor force on which the US economy was built, purposely and successfully appealed to white workers to make alliances based on race rather than class. Thus, traditional labor organizing has always contained a rotten core which has damaged the ability to ripen into a hearty and healthy working class movement. It's not necessary here to rehash the long and shameful history of US unions' participation in the exclusion and the oppression of workers of color, up to and including murder and the destruction of non-white communities in their cities. Labor failed to follow their own advice: “United we stand, divided we fall.”

While unionized workers made economic gains in the period of economic expansion between WWII and the Reagan years, when the economy slowed, without a united working class, the union movement did not have the strength to resist the attacks. From one in three workers belonging to a union fifty years ago, now it is only one in ten.

It is amazing how effective racism has been in keeping the U.S. workers' movement in check, and how slowly people learn. Even in the recent election, many white workers responded to candidate Trump's message that the United States is a white country and that people of color threaten its purity. For too many, that message “trumped” the fact that they were selecting a class enemy to allegedly lead them to the promised land of more jobs and higher wages. This is not new: from the very first union, which was formed not to fight owners but to exclude Chinese workers from the cigar making trade, until the present, labor leaders have not been asking the right question about building the power and unity of the class. Instead, they have asked the narrow question: “What must we do to protect the (white) workers already on the job and in our membership?” When union leaders identify more with white capitalists than with workers of color, the goals of the labor movement are muddled indeed.

What accounts for the conspicuous lack of class consciousness in the US? In European countries whose economies were not constructed on the foundation of slavery, there is a proud working class identification, a culture, and traditions; we do not have that in the US. Because class privilege in countries like the United Kingdom is something a person is born to, working class people there are clear that they are unfairly subordinated to a group only through the accident of birth. It is clear that class privilege is inherited, not earned. In contrast, in the US an illusion is fostered that it is a classless society in which anyone can rise to a higher economic and social station, if only they tug hard enough at their bootstraps. US workers are bred and buttered on the myth that they can become rich, famous, and powerful like white managers and owners that they see—and many often aspire to become such.

Another reason related to the first is that socialism, in which the owning class is identified as the oppressor of the working class, has been and still is an accepted current of political thought in other countries. There are openly socialist parties or workers' parties contending for political leadership. While people abroad may or may not agree with socialist politics, socialist candidates with solid bases among workers are valid choices and not considered bogeymen or terrorists. The US political system is set up so that voters can choose between only two parties both run by capitalist elites, and that is generally accepted against all logic as the most democratic system possible. This is not to say that racism does not exist in countries with more developed working class consciousness, nor that all socialists want an end to capitalism, but to note that class identity is stronger outside the US.

There have certainly been progressive union leaders in the US who are class conscious, and have seen the need to include workers of all races. But historically, they have not gone far enough. Their philosophy has usually been, “Black and white, unite and fight.” The way to bring people together in this

view is to improve everyone's situation through a wage hike or some other economic benefit for every member. But treating everyone as if they are the same, acting "color-blind," leaves racial inequities intact. Dismantling racist structures requires being color-aware, recognizing the different starting points for different radicalized groups of people and their different histories in society and in the economy. For example, most unions with white and non-white workers failed to address the fact that workers of color were in the lowest paid, least skilled, most dangerous jobs in their industry—originally pushed out of skilled categories post-Civil War by white unions, a legacy remaining today. If every worker takes one step forward, that is certainly a good thing—but since their starting lines are different, the gap between whites and non-whites remains. If a white person makes \$2000 a week and a Chicano makes \$1000, a 5% raise for both actually increases the racial wage gap by \$50 a week, or \$2,600 a year. Such "victories" still leave the class divided by race, and maintains the racial hierarchy in the workplace.

Thus, even a class perspective is not sufficient in a nation built on a foundation of white supremacy. A deep understanding of how the invention of race has been the most powerful tool of those who rule to keep workers "in their place," and a commitment to bridging social and economic racial differentials in and out of the workplace is the only way that worker justice will be won. Intentional actions to erase white advantage must be taken.

### **Class Consciousness in Organizing in Communities of Color**

While this article concerns workplace organizing, as a side note, does the question "What builds the power and unity of the working class as a whole" also serve as a guide for social justice organizers in communities of color? In those communities where people of every class face subordination to whites (police don't ask what class you're from when they stop you for driving while black), at first glance class doesn't seem to matter. But progress toward justice will be incomplete if organizers in communities of color do not focus on the issues facing workers in their communities and build the leadership of workers. Say a pile of wood needs to be moved. If wood is lifted starting from the middle of the pile, the bottom of the pile remains where it is. For example, fighting for affordable housing for middle to low-income people can't be separated from addressing homelessness and the right to housing. Making a neighborhood safe doesn't mean joining the white establishment in the condemnation and criminalization of unemployed young people caught up in the drug trade. In the Black Lives Matter movement, young folks have sharply criticized some of the petty bourgeois would-be leaders (some black politicians, ministers, and small businessmen) for this type of stance that is divisive by class.

Hardest of all, solidarity with white workers' struggles needs to be part of the difficult task of the community organizer of color. In the 1980s, while building trade jobs had been mostly restricted to whites by the trades' unions themselves through the hiring halls, when the capitalist class tried to do away with the prevailing wage regulations, which sets a wage and benefit floor on public projects, the most radical leaders in communities of color reminded their people that take-aways for any category of worker is a defeat for all workers. Supporting the prevailing wage regulations was a way to demonstrate class solidarity even with white workers who did not understand that concept themselves.

### **Class Consciousness Learned from Marx Rises in the Revolutionary 1960s**

It is taught from kindergarten on in the US that this is the best, fairest, and most democratic country in the world, with endless opportunity for advancement for all who work hard and play by the rules. Young people do not learn that only whites were able to get free land through the Homestead Act of 1862, or a free college education through the Morrill Act of 1890, or that Social Security originally did not cover the main jobs held by black and brown men and women: agricultural or domestic work. They don't learn that success came to the grandfather of Franklin Roosevelt by dealing opium in China, or that John F. Kennedy's father got rich through his illegal liquor business during Prohibition. The truth is that today, many of the rich and famous had ancestors who got their starts from government handouts and by *not* by playing by the rules! Most people don't recognize that inheritance is the main way that class and

race advantage is passed down generation to generation, explaining the inequalities of today. But the bootstrap myth continues to be sold as truth, continues to be promoted, and the mechanics behind the fabulous lives in the news are hidden, like the apparatus behind the machinations of the Wizard of Oz.

With government largesse and white advantage hidden behind the curtain, US capitalism seems to offer a level playing field for all comers. Moreover, even more hidden is the gap between the triad of global powers emerging after World War II—North America, Europe, and Japan—which robs natural resource wealth from and earns super-profits by exploiting workers in the global South, thereby boosting the living standard of all who live in those dominant parts of the world. It is not unexpected then for union leaders in the US to see their role as winning better wages and working conditions in what they see as a beneficial capitalism, getting a slightly bigger slice of the pie for their members. They are not taught to question whether or not the pie is rotten. A young activist said recently that he took an economics course in college, and the word “fairness” was mentioned only once, almost as a footnote.

It was Marx who provided the analysis that history is made through the struggle between classes, and who analyzed the workings of capitalism to show that while it would have a brief period of creative juice that would lead to new mechanical inventions and improved/cheaper products, its inner dynamics would lead to economic crises, the enrichment of property owners and the impoverishment of those who have nothing to sell but their ability to work.

In the political ferment of the 1960s, Marxism caught hold of a large number of young people, who began to question whether capitalism was a system that should be supported or should be destroyed. The Civil Rights and anti-war struggles revealed the racist, violent, and anti-democratic nature of the US government, and Marxist study circles cropped up among people of all races in the urban centers. With an understanding of class, whites and people of color saw the connections between the issues, and worked together across racial lines.

In the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1960s and early 1970s in which radical analyses and action were commonplace, communist and socialist organizations proliferated. There has not been sufficient documentation of the efforts of socialist organizers during those years: there have been a couple of excellent books written, but since any one work can usually trace only one organization or reflect one perspective, more books and articles need to be written so that future readers and activists can better make their own critical judgments. Suffice it to say here that ‘60s-era activists were likely to know about Marxism and to have Marxist ideas influence their organizing trajectories.

### **Marxist Radicals Join the Union Movement**

One can see the difference between that ‘60s cohort and progressive—but not Marxist—organizers today. Of course, in the ‘60s and ‘70s, there were non-Marxist activists who entered and helped build the labor movement. It was the Marxists, however, who systematically entered workplaces as rank and file workers to either try to unionize, or to make existing unions more democratic, more inclusive, and more militant, and who stayed in those workplaces for decades (some are still there). Often, they were members of revolutionary organizations who strategized about what industries or workplaces were most important to work in, i.e. those sectors that, if strong, unified and militant, could put the biggest “hurt” on capitalism, especially in the area in which the organization operated. The members then got jobs, especially in those strategic workplaces or sectors, willingly accepting assignments where their organization’s theories could be tested. They decidedly did *not* take their cues from existing unions, typically believing that the existing unions were part of the problem. They entered heavy industry, mining, and defense, as well as public sector unions like the postal workers or AFGE (American Federation of Government Employees), AFSCME (American Federation of State, Country, and Municipal Employees) and SEIU (Service Employees International Union) with the idea of building a base and then challenging the union bureaucrats. Being a Marxist meant joining the working class and throwing their lot in with workers, taking seriously socialist labor leader Eugene Debs’ affirmation, “When I rise it will be *with* the ranks, not *from* the ranks.”

Today, with the decline of voluntary, independent political organizations, well intentioned young organizers mostly act as individuals, and are more likely to become union staff, or “salts” sent in to workplaces under the direction of unions, or paid non-profit community organizers. While many do wonderful and effective work, they do so from a different social location than the ones occupied by the people they organize. They are hired to be leaders, rather than earning their leadership by being elected by their peers; their goals are to make economic gains or to win political reforms, without the longer-term frame of revolutionary and transformational change.

But the Marxist groups—while all committed to encouraging class struggle—did not share the same analysis; there was a lot of sectarian in-fighting, sometimes even in the same workplace. There were those who believed in militancy as an end in and of itself. There were those who believed any minor union leader was by definition a sell-out. There were those who didn’t consider race important, only class. There were those who believed that by joining together across race to fight for economic gains, racial differences would melt away.

Yet another grouping of Marxists—which this article documents in one workplace—looked at the history of the origins and development of capitalism in the United States, recognizing that a concrete analysis of particular conditions had to be made in order to create strategies that would eventually build enough working class power to defeat capitalist rule. This branch of Marxists identified fighting racism as the first order of business, *their first priority*, for union activism. They saw ending white supremacy and its sway over white workers was a prerequisite for class unity. They also recognized that the black liberation struggle, which was not mainly a class struggle, was at the forefront of the fight for social justice: gains won by the black movement lifted all marginalized people—including women, non-conforming gender people, people with disabilities—because it was lifting from the bottom not the middle of the pile. Rather than the usual practice of unions reaching out to communities of color only when they needed support, and usually being missing in action when anti-racist struggles needed labor’s support, these activists saw the need to participate in the fight for racial equality in the community as part and parcel of their work within labor.

### **The Preferential Option for People of Color in one Workplace**

Documenting the experience of a small group of Marxist organizers who recognized the importance of addressing white supremacy as a prerequisite for working class unity in an AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees) local in Boston from the early 1970s to the early 1990s is intended to illustrate the difference between organizing based on anti-racist class solidarity and organizing based on traditional bread and butter issues. It is also meant to provide some response to the question as to whether anti-racism can center and strengthen union organizing, or whether, as some predicted, it would lead to greater divisions within the workplace and the class.

The membership of this public sector hospital union included skilled workers such as pharmacists, respiratory therapists, and Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs), but the majority were mostly manual laborers such as housekeepers, food service, transport, laundry workers, security guards, and nurses’ aides among others. Nurses and clerical staff were in a different union. Before the Civil Rights movement, the hospital staff was all white, and most were hired through political patronage—even those in low-paid but stable menial jobs such as housekeeping had worked to elect whatever mayor was in office at the time, or were relatives of someone the mayor knew.

During the Civil Rights movement, African Americans connected the dots between democratic rights (such as voting) and economic rights like associating with other workers in a union. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended discrimination in hiring, and in 1965, an Executive Order was signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, requiring government employers to hire people of all races and ethnicities. That was when non-white workers finally began to be hired at this hospital, and when black and white workers joined AFSCME in droves. It was the black struggle that drove large gains in union membership at that time, demonstrating the importance of the participation of people of color in the labor movement.

By the end of the '60s, membership in the hospital was one third white, one third African American, and one third Puerto Rican. At the time of the entry of a handful of socialist organizers working as nurses' aides, food service workers, patient transport workers and housekeepers, the existing union leadership was a small closed clique. They had never had to lead a fight, and never intended to. They were more interested in keeping their leadership positions, which offered pitifully few perks in exchange for selling out: time off for union conferences, being protected by management, smoking cigars with the leaders of the other locals in the District Council. It was no wonder that member participation was low. "The union?" A dismissive wave of the hand would be the response.

The opening public salvo to signal that new kids were on the block was an article in the union local's newsletter criticizing security guards—all male and all white at that time—for harassing housekeepers, who were mostly black and Puerto Rican. This was a shock! First of all, racist harassment was not supposed to be a union concern; that is, it was not an issue between workers and management. Second, it defended one group of union members against another. Business as usual would have been to sweep those contradictions under the rug.

Did taking on the racism of the security guards bring about "greater power and unity of the class?" No, not in the short run. The guards were predictably offended and angry. But the housekeepers and African American workers took notice. Harassment was a daily trial for them, and so was the fact that their concerns were never taken seriously by either management nor the union. The writer of the article was a young white housekeeper from a notoriously racist working class neighborhood who had joined a Marxist group when barely out of high school. In fact, his father was a security guard in the same hospital—but one for whom class solidarity was a natural instinct. Among white workers, there are always those who do not countenance racism; these people also became part of the base of support for the new organizers.

The socialists also challenged the all-white EMTs. People in the black community complained that they came into neighborhoods more like police than like health personnel, swinging flashlights like billy clubs instead of bringing out their stethoscopes. They didn't treat the families experiencing emergency health crises with respect, as if their black lives mattered. One solution the new kids put forward was to integrate the EMT department, an idea that met with predictable resistance and outrage. While later, with the help of a fellow progressive doctor who became the head of that department—and who had racist graffiti painted on his locker for his efforts—the EMT staff ultimately become integrated. But the main effect was that African-American members of the union felt that their communities were being heard at last. Racial oppression was being exposed to the light of day. African American workers became the foundation of support for the agenda of the Marxist rank-and file organizers; in only a few years, they kicked out the old officers and voted in the radical activists as their new leaders.

It can seem counter-intuitive that to unite the workers, a conscious decision was made to antagonize the white members in the two jobs that had power over other people. But where racism exists among the membership, neutrality is tacit agreement with the status quo. Liberation Catholics talk about "the preferential option for the poor," noting that exercising that option does not exclude others from concern, but that the test of moral justice is how the poorest and vulnerable are faring. Similarly, this group of socialists believed that a "preferential option for people of color" must be exercised; this does not exclude white workers from concern, but the main test of justice is how workers of color are faring.

Various methods were used to keep white workers in the union fold while simultaneously challenging their racism. When issues arose—for example, safety issues for pharmacists who had to transport Methadone to another site—all stops were pulled out to win the creation of new protocols. One of the most vocal racist guards, who accused the new leadership of cooking the books, was invited for a private look at the books so he could see for himself. While he did not change his racist views, he felt that he was taken seriously, and stopped his vociferous trashing of the new leadership. At least these folks were honest and open to hearing criticism!

The security force was integrated, and over time, the guards became supportive and active in the union. However, the EMTs did not come around. They dis-affiliated with AFSCME, and became part of the police union.

Puerto Ricans also occupied the lower-paid jobs such as housekeeping and food service. Spanish was their first language, and since union meetings were in English, their identification with the union was marginal, and the new leaders who believed that union democracy meant the participation of all were anxious to get their involvement. An offer was made to appoint a special union steward to handle the grievances of Spanish speakers. They weren't interested. Spanish music at the union Christmas party? That was nice, but still no one came to meetings. Finally, they were asked what they needed. Softball is huge in that community, and there was a Puerto Rican softball league; people who worked together at the hospital had formed a team, but had no uniforms. Could the union provide them with uniforms? Great idea! There was some discretionary money in the treasury, and other members agreed to spend it on the local's own Puerto Rican team. The uniforms had the AFSCME logo all over them, advertising the union on the playing field. Non-Puerto Rican union activists went to the games to cheer them on. The responsiveness to a need that had nothing to do with a workplace issue made the difference: Puerto Rican workers became aware that there was a union responsive to them, and they started coming to meetings, and several became stewards and activists. A commitment to inclusion means you don't blame the marginalized group for its lack of participation; it is the responsibility of leadership to keep trying until everyone feels welcome.

In both the case of responding to black community complaints about EMT behavior, and in the case of the Puerto Rican softball league, another principle besides class solidarity emerged: there is no bright line between workplace and community. Workers have lives beyond the workplace, and union organizers can and must help solve community problems and/or participate in community activities. It is true of every one of us: today, if you're sick, your problem is health care; tomorrow if your child is bullied, your problem is the school; and the day after, if you get written up at work for something you didn't do, your problem is the workplace. Building worker power cannot be confined to one issue or one place.

This principle was most keenly illustrated with Haitian workers. Due to another public hospital's closure and the fact that there was a large percentage of Haitian workers at that other hospital, many Haitians got re-located to the hospital led by socialists. The usual attitudes cropped up, among all other workers, including African Americans. "The Haitians are clannish and just stick to each other." "They should speak English." "They're talking about us behind our backs." "They're foreigners." The leaders had two problems. How could they break into the Haitian group and get them to be union activists? And second, how could they get acceptance for them from the rest of the membership?

Again, a special Haitian steward was offered, discussions about union issues like an upcoming contract fight were had with whatever Haitian worker was around. But even the leaders felt like they were hitting a wall. Maybe it was true that Haitians just wouldn't couldn't relate.

Then, in September 1991, a horrific poultry plant fire in which the exit doors had been locked killed 25 people in North Carolina. Progressive unionists around the country rallied against the lack of safety and the higher value the owners placed on chickens than on black lives. The hospital local organized their members to go to the rally near City Hall. While there, they noticed another rally going on in another corner of the plaza. When they went to investigate, they recognized some of the people as their fellow Haitian workers, and a couple of them were clearly leading the other rally.

Coincidentally, it turned out that in September 1991, the first honestly elected president of Haiti, Jean-Bertrand Aristide—after years of dictatorship and domestic terror—had been deposed in a coup, and Haitians were protesting and demanding his reinstatement. This was a truly critical historical moment for the Haitian people. The local leadership immediately recognized that workplace issues at the hospital paled in significance by comparison. They decided that the best course of action was, "If you can't organize them, join them!" The AFSCME local asked how they could help, and the answer was to become part of the Haitian community's communication network to spread the word on the coup, and to pressure the US to help return President Aristide to his rightful position. A lesson learned is that it doesn't work to go to the group targeted for inclusion by making statements. What works is to go asking questions, and to listen to the answers.

But joining the Haitian struggle did not mean that tensions between Haitians and others disappeared; it was one thing for socialists with an understanding of imperialism to ally with Haitians, but it



was another to get rank and file members to understand and support that struggle. The solution lay in history. The new leaders promoted democracy by opening up the processes for participation. Union meetings were not “business” meetings run with Robert’s Rules, which often are used to shut down dissenting voices; instead, they were places where education was key. The local had one of the Haitian workers, who was also a leader in the pro-Aristide movement, speak. He explained Haiti’s history, that they were the first nation of formerly enslaved people to win their independence, and that they participated not only in the US Civil War to end slavery, but in the Revolutionary War to liberate white people from British colonial rule! When people learn that history, their negative stereotyping turns to surprise and then respect.

But what about the traditional work of unions, the fight for increased wages and benefits and better working conditions? All of the efforts to unify the membership across race, ethnicity, and language were meant to build power of the group as a whole, so as to win concrete victories.

First, the leadership of the local did away with the idea that it is union staff, the business reps, who solve problems. They started getting members involved in fighting for the local’s own grievances; rather than emphasizing just the legal arguments or the body of evidence that a person or department’s rights had been violated, the goal was to involve as many other members in support of the grievant. Ground zero of solidarity was to stand up for a fellow worker, to take the risk of visibly and vocally lending testimony on their behalf, in front of managers with the authority to target you for being a union troublemaker. But as it becomes the norm to support others, then the risk becomes smaller to each member over time. The role of the leaders was to model that idea: to take the biggest risks, and to show that they could still keep their jobs.

Second, concessions from management are not won by back-room dealing. Negotiations are conducted in full view of the membership, with no information withheld, and with the constant solicitation of the members’ views. The local leaders became known for their willingness to go to bat for all their members, and for being tough and savvy contract negotiators.

## **Narrowing the Racial Gap**

Anti-racism was the hallmark of the local leadership. But the proof is in the pudding. Beyond challenging discriminatory behavior, concrete changes to make the workplace more equitable had to be won.

Immigrant workers were trapped in unskilled jobs in large part due to their lack of command of the English language. A Vietnamese housekeeper had been a Professor of French language and literature before becoming a refugee in the United States. A Somali trained as an ophthalmologist in Italy, fluent in Arabic and Italian but not English, could only be a pharmacy tech.

The union leadership initiated an English as a Second Language class, paid for by the union. They won buy-in from the management so that the session began an hour before the end of the shift and continued for an hour after, so both the management and the worker were invested in the program. An ESL teacher was found who used popular education methodology, in which important questions requiring critical thinking are explored. Based on the ideas of Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire, the method taps into what people know from experience, and their knowledge is valued and made foundational to the answers to the questions posed. For the Marxists, this mirrored the “mass line” they learned from reading Chairman Mao: you go to the people asking questions about their frustrations and fears, you find out what their skills are and get their ideas on solutions; then those are distilled into a program and a plan of action. That way, people are not taking orders from above. Because they are hearing their own ideas fed back in an organized form, they are willing to take the suggested course of action. Mao called this “From the people, to the people.” The institution of ESL is an example of that method of work.

One would think that the idea of a career ladder for the nurses’ aides, mostly women of color, would be a no-brainer; a way to alleviate the workload of the RNs, to save money for the management, to increase job satisfaction for the aides. Moreover, it was a way to improve patient care. As a public hospi-

tal, the vast majority of patients were low-income people of color. The aides came from the same neighborhoods, racial and ethnic backgrounds as the patients; they could speak Spanish to the Puerto Ricans, or sometimes they knew or were related to the patient's family, or they could chit-chat about life back home in the West Indies. "Comfort" to a patient means in part familiarity, feeling like the caregiver understands you, empathizes with you. Technical skills are just one part of helping people regain their health. However, in proposing a Senior Nurses' Aide position, the union came up against opposition from the RNs who were afraid of encroachment on their territory. Their arguments were couched in terms of "quality of care," which had racist overtones. Fortunately, the leadership of the nurse's union was progressive, and the new job category was created.

But the biggest issue was affirmative action. In the public sector, affirmative action hiring was required, and from the late '60s-early '70s, the workforce had become more diverse. But in the 1978, California passed Proposition 13 which cut taxes and therefore state revenues. The right-wing, anti-tax, small government ideology spread across the country. Reagan took that ideology to the federal level. Cutbacks trickled down. At this hospital, layoffs began, and as was mentioned, one of the public hospitals in the city closed completely. Now there was a dilemma. When there is hiring, affirmative action is palatable to whites since people of all races are getting jobs. But during lay-offs, it is a different story. If lay-offs were to happen by seniority, since people of color had been hired more recently due to the Civil Rights gains of the previous decade, the workforce could revert back to being mostly white. Would it be fair to people who had been discriminated against in hiring now be the first fired? Would it be fair to a white person who had been on the job longer than a worker of color to lose their job? When it comes down to who loses their livelihood, it gets personal. Many would say that seniority is a sacred union principle. The union leadership had to debunk that, and to win people to the view that class unity trumps seniority. As always, the leadership brought the issue up for discussion at a union meeting. What was fascinating was that the sides did not line up by race. Some white workers felt that consistent fairness required affirmative action in lay-offs. Some black workers were against affirmative action of any kind, since they believed that merit alone should be the criteria for hiring and firing, and that they were willing to match their qualifications with anyone's. After months of education and discussion, it was brought to a vote. The local agreed to creating different seniority lists by race, and then laying off proportional numbers, so that the same proportion of white to black and other workers of color would remain the same before and after the lay-off. That was a proud moment.

Because lay-offs were affecting other public sector jobs, the local leadership initiated the formation of a new organization of union activists of all races committed to protecting affirmative action gains. Members of other AFSCME locals, of SEIU locals, of the black firefighters' organization, and others were involved, and a lot of public education was done in union halls and in the press. In the case of this hospital local, because their contract was part of a city-wide group of locals under a District Council, and because the other locals upheld strict seniority in lay-offs, the fairer proposal got the ax. Across the city, only one union, an SEIU local which was also led by socialists from the school of Marxism that saw addressing race as the prerequisite for class unity, succeeded in getting the proportional lay-off language in their contract.

## **Social Justice Issues Are Labor Issues**

Unions—as the main defenders of working people in the absence of any political organization that represents them, and given that community based non-profits often focus on single issues such as youth leadership or access to housing, etc.—should see their job as improving workers' lives in all areas. From pretending to be a lawyer and getting on the phone with a landlord trying to evict a member (and stopping the eviction), to organizing members to rally for gay rights—that was what it was called at the time—and explaining gender justice as a labor issue, to being the labor spokesperson at a massive outcry over the terrorist killing of workers at a clinic that served women seeking abortions, the local's leadership became known as a progressive voice on a wide range of issues. It was involved in strengthening the

leadership of people of color on the City Council, and for campaigning for progressive candidates for local and federal offices.

But before taking controversial stands on social issues, union meetings included discussions and votes, and the leadership was not always successful in convincing the majority to agree with their views. For example, the state proposed cutbacks to the welfare program. Members themselves were one step away from having to be on welfare, so it was thought that they would be strong supporters of the welfare program. But that proved to be false. Many low-income women workers saw a big difference between themselves and their sisters and neighbors, whom they perceived as freeloaders. It's one thing when you hear that kind of talk from elites, but when people are talking from experience with their own families, there had to be a grain of truth in the argument. Perhaps the incentives and disincentives in the program's design were wrong—but that wasn't part of the proposed legislation. The local had to stay silent.

### **Lessons: The Return of Business as Usual**

A radical leader should not consider being president of a union as a lifetime job, a situation unfortunately common in many unions. After being an officer for some years, it is hard to keep the same level of outrage and passion, grievance after grievance, contract after contract, lay-off fight after lay-off fight. And while the political challenges as described above are energizing, creative, and satisfying because they make real advances in solidarity, the day to day nuts and bolts of hearing worker complaints and policing the contract is the bulk of the work, and it can get debilitating. As one union President complained, "I feel like I'm spending my life fighting for the fair distribution of overtime!"

There is also the problem of the way the membership perceives the leaders in a culture that loves to have rock stars. In this union, being an officer was not a full time or even part time job; officers including the President remained in her/his job classification and did that job every day whether it was transporting patients, dishing up mashed potatoes on the food tray line, or sweeping the floors. But even in this case, the officers came to be seen as the embodiment of the union, and not so much as a fellow human being. The more effective a leader, the more likely the gap. That gap becomes a problem when the leader wants to have honest conversations with their members about their lives and beliefs, to have the camaraderie that comes from being an equal, to be seen as someone who brings out the power in others, rather than being powerful themselves.

Then there is the issue of succession. Bringing forward new leadership is necessary to ensure lasting change, and the socialist leaders tried to do so. But if an elected leader is not part of an independent radical organization, if they do not have comrades who provide the support, discipline, and strategic direction to identify and meet new challenges, if there is no place to discuss new conditions—such as the influx of the Haitian workers—to study possible ways to meet those conditions, and to evaluate the tactics tried, then it is easy to sink back into business as usual. Being part of an organization keeps a person on a steady course, and makes them less likely to fall victim to the pressures of living in a capitalist culture. Understanding that in advance, the Marxist organizers formed study groups with workers they identified as open to radical ideas; the sessions included the nuts and bolts of capitalism, how to use the mass line, how to answer the question "What builds the unity and power of the working class as a whole" in concrete situations.

Those who took office after the original group of Marxist organizers were progressive, had gone through some of these study sessions, and had worked side by side with them. However, they did not join an independent organization, with revolutionary goals and, over time, they did not carry forward the work. Their class consciousness was drowned by the capitalist culture around them, including the culture of the union bureaucracy, i.e. the desire to get "perks," to conciliate with management, or to run the local from the top-down to stay in office. This is the water we all swim in; it is all too easy to drown. The local did not remain what it once was: a city-wide progressive force on a range of social and economic issues, a militant and strategic organization ready to support both labor and community struggles for justice and equity.

Implicit in the failure to recruit the indigenous union activists to political organizations is the implosion of the Marxist organizations themselves. Sectarianism, divisions, infighting; rather than unifying into larger projects, these groups were unable to collaborate. Rather than growing, many dissolved. Socialist groups too found out that “divided we fall.” Moreover, the fervor of the ‘60s had largely evaporated by the ‘80s, and people were not looking for answers the way they had in the earlier decades.

But that is not to say that the experiment at the hospital, and in other workplaces not described here, was a total failure. There were longer term results that were not expected. Many members, not even just the most active, later said that the way they saw society had changed because of what they experienced: there were the one-on-one political conversations that happened while packing sterile instruments or dishing up jello—educational moments not experienced before or since; the exhilaration of adding your voice to hundreds of other voices at rallies; the rush of adrenaline when confronting power; the laughter at the sarcastic rebuttals to management b...s....; the pride in seeing one’s own cartoon printed in the union newsletter; the excitement of a stand-off with management and seeing management capitulate; the stimulation of hearing diverse opinions and learning history at union meetings. These are experiences of worker power that can give a taste of what is possible.

Another unexpected long-term result was the union consciousness of the Haitian community. Because people talk about what goes on at work with family and neighbors, Haitians who didn’t work at the hospital knew about the union’s support for Haitians on and off the job. Nearly twenty years later, when a different union was attempting to organize Haitian workers in a different workplace, they heard that workers remembered what the hospital union had done, and it translated to a pro-union stance.

Finally, the experience showed that it is possible to make fighting racism the first order of business, and that as theorized, tackling white supremacy full-on was a successful labor organizing strategy. For a historical moment, the small local was a force beyond its membership and beyond the union movement, crossing the line into community and social justice organizing.

### **Conjoining Worker and Racial Justice**

The question as to what must be done to build the power and unity of the working class *as a whole* cannot continue to sit on the back burner. Across the globe, it is socialists who are the clearest about the clash between classes as the driver of change. Some inroads are being made, with Bernie Sanders making “socialist” a proud designation, showing through his policy ideas how the working class can be prioritized. It might be said that his socialism promotes the preferential option for the working class. This is significant. However, he is not the kind of socialist that challenges the capitalist system, nor does he see how addressing racism as the first order of business, necessary to achieve real justice. Until an inclusive vision that understands the preferential option for people of color takes root in the working class, capitalists will continue to be successful at dividing workers through racism.

In addition, voluntary political organizations independent of the current two parties, grounded among working people of all races, which take their direction from an engaged membership from the bottom up, must be organized as a corrective antidote to political and union bureaucracies. These are important alternative spaces to build the power of the people and a new culture, a new way of doing business. These don’t need to be started from scratch. There are lessons to be learned both from the organizations of the ‘60s that were radical experiments in organizing and from new civil organizations around the globe.

Worker justice is social justice when it tackles white supremacy in society and within unions, and social justice movements are truly about justice when they address the particular impact of their issue on working class people. In the US, “justice” and “rights” have been sliced and diced to the point that the whole is lesser than the sum of its parts. If the two great movements for power and freedom in the US, the multi-racial labor movement and the multi-class oppressed nationality liberation movements can be strengthened and conjoined, another US is possible.