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Time to Tackle the Whole Squid: Confronting White Supremacy to Build Shared Bargaining Power

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Time to Tackle the Whole Squid: Confronting White Supremacy to Build Shared Bargaining Power

Abstract

The operators of global capital, who have representatives in both US political parties, use a system of white supremacy and structural racism to keep working people disorganized and isolated from each other so that they do not collectively (and successfully) disrupt their ability to continue to concentrate resources among a tiny, select few. And thus in order to truly confront global capitalism and reverse the dramatic trends of inequality in the US and elsewhere, the struggle against white supremacy must be a central element of any strategy to build working class power.

Keywords

Social Justice, Social Justice Unionism

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Cover Page Footnote

Erica Smiley is the Organizing Director at Jobs with Justice. She sits on the board of the Highlander Research and Education Center. In the past, she has organized with community groups such as Progressive Maryland, the Tenants and Workers Support Committee in Virginia and SEIU Local 500. She was also active in the Black Radical Congress. She is originally from Greensboro, North Carolina, and thanks Mina Itabashi and Amanda Devecka-Rinear for their support. Parts of this article expand on a piece written by the same author and published on Medium March 9, 2017.

https://medium.com/@Smiley_JWJ/how-to-build-a-21st-century-labor-movement-confront-white-supremacy-911bda59d2d (accessed May 17, 2017).

To state the obvious, global capitalism and its impacts on working people created the situation we currently find ourselves in—both in the US and around the world—where right-wing populism is cashing in on the fear and insecurity of working people. The operators of global capital, who have representatives in both US political parties, use a system of white supremacy and structural racism to keep working people disorganized and isolated from each other so that they do not collectively (and successfully) disrupt their ability to continue to concentrate resources among a tiny, select few. And thus in order to truly confront global capitalism and reverse the dramatic trends of inequality in the US and elsewhere, the struggle against white supremacy must be a central element of any strategy to build working class power. When unions and community organizations centralize the struggle against white supremacy, accounting for the impacts of structural racism in their efforts to expand the scale and scope through which ordinary people are able to organize and collectively negotiate against shared targets, they win. And they do not simply win short-term compromises for a small amount of members; they win in ways that change the relations of power in favor of the working class.

Imagine a giant cephalopod lurking at the bottom of a great reef. In one long tentacle it chokes the life out of an unsuspecting crab. Nearby, upon seeing this, a school of fish swim in the opposite direction—displacing a small, confused swordfish only to get crushed by another of the beast’s tentacles. And all of them completely unseen by a clam that appears to be ok on the top of a small mound that is actually the predator’s mouth slowly sucking it dry.

There are reasons that global capitalism has been called a giant vampire squid from hell. Like in the allegory above, various segments of the working class get trapped in different tentacles of the beast, confused about what has happened to them and isolated from how the same creature is impacting others. While global capital has systemically de-regulated in every sector, privatized public services at unprecedented rates, and turned the future itself into a commodity to be bet on through financial speculation, the individual experiences of this phenomenon are more nuanced, varied and often feels disparate to those negatively impacted.

White workers experience job loss, the lack of needed services such as healthcare, poor housing conditions, and limited educational opportunities. While communities of color are suffering from diabetes and hypertension, white communities are dying,

due to both rises in the number of “deaths of despair”—death by drugs, alcohol and suicide—and to a slowdown in progress against mortality from heart disease and cancer, the two largest killers in middle age. The combined effect means that mortality rates of whites with no more than a high school degree, which were around 30 percent lower than mortality rates of blacks in 1999, grew to be 30 percent higher than blacks by 2015 (Case and Deaton, 2017).

There is no way around it. Global capitalism has kicked the butts of white workers over the last several decades. And they have not gotten much help from either US political party to fix it.

In his November 2016 article in *The Nation*, Kirk Noden illustrates the betrayal many white workers felt, using Youngstown, Ohio as a case study. After steel companies and other manufacturing industries left, Noden explains that

In a place like Youngstown, that means not only an inability to get a well-paying job at the steel mill; it also means owning a house that has failed to appreciate in value for 20 to 30 years, in a city that continues to lose double-digit percentages of its population every 10 years. It is not just a stripping out of economic opportunity but a stripping away of identity for these communities. It is the sense of abandonment and perpetual decline that people feel mired in. Resources, jobs, decent housing, quality neighborhoods and schools are all in decline. It creates a “scarcity mentality” for white working-class people and others who live in the heartland (Noden, 2016).

Noden goes on to explain that after industry left in the late 1970s, white workers joined with others in the community, including faith groups, private investors and neighboring black families to attempt to get federal support from Jimmy Carter's Administration to re-open the mills as community owned, co-operatively run enterprises. But President Carter caved to the interests of US Steel and other corporations in hopes of getting re-elected:

The impact of this betrayal on white working-class people was a universal distrust and dislike for institutions—none of which were able to defend their livelihoods or their futures. The unions didn't stay around to organize a new strategy for revitalizing Youngstown. They moved to another line of defense elsewhere, as they grew increasingly insular and focused on protecting their shrinking base (Noden, 2016).

The impact of the loss of manufacturing jobs along with the corporate class' tendency to downplay its significance—or worse, to praise it as a necessary evil of globalization—continues to feed this feeling of betrayal among the white working class.

But it is their use of white supremacy that ultimately disorganizes white people from seeing global capitalism as the problem, and instead aims their righteous anger at the wrong people—including Black workers, immigrants, refugees and Muslims who themselves are also suffering under the same oppressive economic policies. What Noden refers to as “scarcity mentality” is coupled with a sense of entitlement that is encouraged by white supremacy; a sense that I, the white Christian male, *should* have a good job/government support, not *{fill in the blank oppressed community}* in *{nearby large city}*...even if the experience of workers in those communities is marred by exploitation, violence, deportation and stigma.

Add to that new shifts in social expectations for tolerance and even acceptance of those different than them (won through decades of struggle) turns the white workers' sense of scarcity into an outright fear of extinction. Reverend J.C. Austin notes in *The Hill*,

The overriding emotion behind rejecting both political correctness in general and saying “Happy Holidays” in particular is one of anger: anger at feeling forced to change one's behavior as a concession to the concerns or beliefs of others; anger at feeling that the concerns and beliefs of white Christians, in particular, are being actively and intentionally displaced in our culture in order to favor those of other religions and racial/ethnic backgrounds (Austin, 2016).

Since the election of Donald Trump in the US, there has been renewed interest in the plight of the working class white voters who overwhelmingly elected him. This base of individuals recognized that they have been wronged by the 1% and elements of the government. While labor unions have historically played an important role in mobilizing white workers against right-wing populism, they are much weaker today than they once were,¹ arguably many union locals did not take on race as aggressively in this election than they should have. Simultaneously, progressive organizations have not done much to build membership or shape the narrative of poor white communities—often brushing them off instead with Daily Show style quips about incest and missing teeth.

To the credit of some white Trump voters, they identified with Bernie Sanders in the primary elections—quick to align with an outwardly socialist candidate over the established, corporate-backed politicians. But after the primaries, those without an analysis of white supremacy—i.e. those out of relationship with their union (or any union and/or or progressive community organizations) that could clarify their conditions—saw Trump as the only outsider politician, despite his obvious connections to global capitalism. For many, it was a vote for some kind of change, any change, even if it came in the form of reactionary solutions touted by the extreme right against much of their shared self-interests with workers of color.

In nearly all of these narratives, white workers are perpetually the primary victims—solely seeing one arm of the giant vampire squid, and it is trying to destroy only them. Many do not connect their experiences with global capital to the experiences of others. Meanwhile, in those same Midwestern towns, black and brown workers are struggling just as much, and most often more. It would take more than 84 years for Latinos to amass the wealth that white Americans currently have, and 228 years for Black families to close the wealth divide. Additionally, communities of color have the added concern of violence. It's one thing to have to send your children to under-resourced schools; it's another thing for those same children to have to walk to school in fear of police violence, vigilante hate crimes and/or deportation. It is one thing to work a low-wage job. But what happens when that same employer can hold the threat of ICE or social services over the heads of workers to keep them from improving their conditions?

While big steel and other manufacturing jobs were leaving Indiana, many white workers were able to leave with them. When interviewing a woman named Maria Garcia in Gary, Indiana, Chris Arnade cites her in *The Guardian* as saying,

This street used to be filled with good neighbors. Mostly whites. Some were Europeans from Spain, Poland, and Germany, and some from Puerto Rico like myself. Then in 1981, people started moving out. They started seeing black people coming in, and they said they would bring drugs and crime, so they left. I stayed because I don't judge by color. ...Racism killed Gary. The whites left Gary, and the blacks couldn't. Simple as that. Print that because it is true (Arnade, 2017).

Where jobs are still available in communities like this, they often pay less. And the increasing number of lower wage jobs in every industry makes it more difficult for many in manufacturing to keep wages increasing at the same pace as production and costs. For example, transnational auto companies such as Nissan and Volkswagen have focused their US manufacturing growth in the southern part of the country—where the remnants of Jim Crow and extreme limitations on union representation prevent the overwhelmingly black workforces from organizing successfully. Simultaneously, the base of the United Auto Workers (UAW) throughout the Midwest, unable to avoid the downward pull of their southern peers, is struggling to maintain gains it won over the last several decades—conceding to increased numbers of temporary and contract workers, regressively tiered wages, and cuts to healthcare.²

This is not a new practice of capitalism. Historically oppressed workers are often targeted for exploitative jobs because they are seen as having less protection to fight-back than white American Christian male workers. As Maurice Weeks recently noted on *Medium*, “When George Pullman was hiring his staff of Porters following the Civil War, he purposely chose dark skinned black staff, many of whom were former slaves, knowing that he could exploit them for wages and that they would play into the racial stereotypes and roles of the mostly white passenger base” (Weeks, 2016).

Likewise, immigrants—documented and undocumented—are currently targeted for jobs that put them in precarious situations, often recruited because of it. While technically protected by the National Labor Relations Act, undocumented workers are simply not entitled to remedies such as the recovery of stolen wages, overtime, and being paid below poverty levels.³ And in the case of temporary work visa holders, many are bound to one employer who could threaten their families and their livelihoods if they step out of line.

Yes! Magazine shared the experiences of Mexican guest workers when reporting

In the small town of Breaux Bridge, Louisiana., Martha Uvalle and her co-workers at C.J.'s Seafood, a Walmart supplier, faced abuses many Americans imagine only take place in poorer, faraway countries: They were forced to work shifts of up to 24 hours, with no overtime pay; threatened with beatings if their breaks lasted too long; and, on at least two

occasions, locked inside the facility to work. Some fell asleep at their workstations from exhaustion (Garza, 2012).

Conditions like this drive wages down for everyone in that sector and in that labor market. Further, white workers don't want these jobs. And to state the obvious, black workers have "been there, done that and refuse to wear the t-shirt" when it comes to forced labor in America. But the truth is that no one should have to suffer through exploitation like this. These jobs—whether in Louisiana, Indiana or Ohio—should be good paying family sustaining jobs. Repression of this sort does not benefit white workers. It benefits the employers, and drives wages, services and living conditions down for everyone—including white American Christian males.

These stories could be from any town in the US, and many towns throughout the world today. Capitalists use white supremacy to supposedly benefit one community from the oppression of the next. After the loss of a local industry, a predominantly white community may be promised a new prison or deportation center to create dangerous low-wage jobs to replace what they lost while jobless black and brown workers in a nearby community are then targeted for petty crimes and given long sentences to keep those prisons full. The Trump Administration is praised for its military action against the Syrian government while simultaneously refusing US asylum to refugees fleeing those same areas and cutting back on healthcare for veterans. Workers on all sides are suffering as the squid plays each against the other, distracting all from its role in what is actually happening.

This is to the advantage of those individuals in the corporate class who benefit most from a disorganized working class. If working people were instead acting collectively to curb global capital, these executives would be on the losing end. Unlike many in our movement, our opposition—the Rob Waltons, Rex Tillersons and Koch Brothers of the world—are clear that the only way to thoroughly and completely reverse the systems of global capital is for working people to organize and bargain collectively across sector, geography and company in ways that actively withhold their further participation in these systems until they are changed. Corporations have re-organized themselves to more efficiently exploit the human labor and natural resources of the Earth in devastating ways. National industries have given way to multinational production chains, just-in-time manufacturing and compulsive labor migration patterns that maintain the companies' flexibility needs. And yet many unions still insist on using an 80-year old framework to build collective bargaining power. It should be no surprise whatsoever that union density in the United States has hit rock bottom.⁴

Collective bargaining, at its best, is a system by which workers are able to exercise power in a way that directly confronts the owners of capital, and in a way that reclaims portions of that capital for working people and their communities. It has served as a direct mechanism to fight for a fair return on the labor we put into building, operating, servicing, or moving something. However, 21st century collective bargaining cannot be limited to our grandparents' version of collective bargaining rights—focused exclusively on worksites supported by the legal framework of the National Labor Relations Act. Rather organizers must explore a more expansive definition of collective bargaining that adapts to the context of global capitalism—ultimately changing the very nature of what the contract covers—broadening what workers can negotiate over and who they can negotiate with—from their direct "boss" to the individuals with concentrated power in their sector or community. And confronting white supremacy must remain a central element of this overall strategy to prevent the opposition from dividing workers and weakening their collective power.

This is not an insurmountable challenge. Working people have altered the relations of power and re-shaped the frameworks of collective bargaining in the United States in the 20th century by building out explicitly multiracial strategies against common enemies. In their long struggle to unionize workers at Ford Motor Company in the late 1930s and early 1940s, for example, the UAW (United Auto Workers) had been excluding black workers from their organizing efforts, and many white workers did not believe black workers should get equal pay for equal work. The company had successfully thwarted unionization efforts playing in to these divisions, not only offering jobs to black workers, but also promoting them into

higher level positions—including within its own security forces. In doing so, Henry Ford clouded his own racist, anti-semantic viewpoints with a new reputation that saw the company as a pathway—albeit a paternalistic pathway—out of poverty for black workers, pitting them against the mostly white union.

Black workers who were supportive of the unionization efforts pushed the UAW to realize that in order to expand collective bargaining power for workers in the industry beyond General Motors, they would have to confront white supremacy. Thus UAW began exposing the discrimination black workers still faced in Ford plants, including the overwhelming majority of black workers in low-paying jobs. Pushed by the demands of black workers, the union started to hire black organizers and began engaging black communities. And they were pushed to look at and renegotiate some of their existing collective bargaining agreements that had consistently disadvantaged Black workers in promotions, seniority, and higher paying positions.

This comprehensive effort united the interests of black and white workers in the auto industry—leading to increased bargaining power at Ford and throughout the sector for all workers. The efforts gave birth to a new local, UAW Local 600, which included Black workers. These workers' relationship to the union and to bargaining rights was based in campaigns that confronted discrimination. Local 600 became one of the most powerful locals in the union. Leaders coming out of the local, having demonstrated their ability to win significant gains for workers and their families, established channels that would develop new inspiring leaders for future struggles—training other organizers and agitators in the Black community who then went on to lead other campaigns around housing, public education and voting rights. “The modern civil rights movement arose out of the proletarianization and unionization of black America” as Nelson Lichtenstein (1995) put it in his book *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*:

With almost one hundred thousand black workers organized in the Detroit area, African-American unionists from the Rouge and other UAW plants poured into the Detroit NAACP chapter, demanded the promotion of black workers in metropolitan war plants, and mobilized thousands to defend black occupancy of the Sojourner Truth Homes, a federally funded project that became a violent center of conflict between white neighborhoods and the housing-starved black community (Lichtenstein, 1995: 207).

Today's workers are just as creative. None have been waiting for some team of academics to come up with the perfect strategy. They have been experimenting with new models that the present generation can learn from as it attempts to re-balance the relations of power in our society—at the workplace and in communities.

One such approach seeks to organize workers to “bargain” with the .01%, the individuals at the top of the pyramid benefiting from the labor, rents and loan payments of working people. When these organizations refer to a “boss,” they are not just referencing some vague person sitting in the corner of a factory building. They are talking about the individuals who own and profit from various enterprises and thus hold significant positions of power in our economy. They are not simply vague systems to analyze or generic companies to be angry at. They are people making decisions that ultimately benefit a small select few at the top to the detriment of everyone else. There simply is no winning plan to build a shared prosperity without confronting these individual owners and their corporate power directly.

For example, the Walton family that controls 48% of Walmart is worth more than \$100 billion, greater than the combined wealth of the bottom half of the US population. Walmart directly employs 2.2 million workers but it also has its tentacles stretched throughout our economy.

Greg Penner, Walmart's chairman and son-in-law to Rob Walton, has his own investment firm, sits on the boards of Walmart and Hyatt Hotels, and funds anti-public school initiatives through a set of non-profit organizations. If you try to chart out all the workers he touches, whether or not they are directly employed by one of these companies, the list is massive.

It would include Walmart “associates” working in the stores—black, brown and white workers often funneled to work retail after other more sustainable jobs have left their communities. It would

include the Louisiana and Maryland seafood workers from Latin America, whose employers supply exclusively to Walmart. Whether or not they are directly employed by Walmart, these are all “Walmart workers.” Penner’s list would also include subcontracted housekeepers at the Hyatt in Los Angeles, the guestworkers on visas doing landscaping at the Hyatt in Denver, and the temporary construction workers building the new Hyatt in New Orleans. Whether or not they are employed by Hyatt, they are all “Hyatt workers.” It would include the janitors in the Silicon Valley building of his investment firm, the teachers and staff at the charter schools he funds, and the teachers, staff, parents, and students at the public schools gutted by his efforts. It would include these workers and many, many others. Together, all of these are “Greg Penner’s workers.”

So why not organize these workers into a new wave of “bargaining units” to negotiate with Greg Penner--bargaining with the .01% at the top of global capital?

To put a fine point on it, it was this methodology that contributed to the success of workers in Waterford, New York earlier this year. Workers represented by IUE-CWA (International Union of Electrical Workers-Communications Workers of America) Locals 81359 and 81380 reached an agreement with Momentive Performance Materials. After a 14-week strike at the Waterford, NY plant, 700 workers returned to work on the eve of planning an action targeting Steve Schwarzman—a billionaire Wall Street hedge fund manager who heads Blackstone and whose takeover of Momentive drove down wages and benefits over the past decade at several companies. They stopped focusing solely on the company’s immediate executives, and went to the individuals at Blackstone ultimately benefiting from their exploitation as well as the exploitation of workers at other companies financed (or bankrupted) by Schwarzman, urban tenants in dilapidated Blackstone owned buildings, underwater homeowners in Blackstone financed mortgage agreements, and many others.⁵

They essentially began to negotiate directly with the .01% at the top of their food chain, asserting both their interests as well as those of an informal multi-racial alliance of others who were negatively impacted by that shared target, thus turning what appeared to be a guaranteed loss into a contract.

This does not always have to be complicated. Sometimes, the decision to take on a direct employer whose practices are actively demonstrating how global capital uses white supremacy to divide workers is radical enough. The UAWs decision to take on Nissan by supporting workers organizing in Mississippi and Tennessee gets at the heart of corporate practices to situate so-called good manufacturing jobs in poor communities of color, in order to drive wages and standards down for everyone. Workers in the Nissan plant are from a variety of backgrounds—white, black and Latino. But the majority are black workers. And it is not an accident that the only Nissan plants in the world where they do not recognize the workers’ union is in these two plants. Winning at Nissan would in itself be a victory against white supremacy, and would begin to erode global capital’s ability to leverage it in the auto industry.

Again, success will be based on the worker movement’s ability to build new and creative strategies to confront corporate owners in this period—broadening what workers can negotiate over and who they can negotiate with—from their direct “boss” to the individuals with concentrated power in their sector.

Another approach to how working people build power has been recently introduced as “bargaining for the common good,”⁶ which in a way re-popularizes social justice unionism in the 21st century. Over several generations, community organizations and unions have fought for quality public schools, hospitals, mass transit, affordable housing, and the regulation of health and the environment to create a civil society that serves all of us. These institutions are in jeopardy after years of attack from the financial sector and global capital which lusts hungrily after the opportunity to profit off of these previously off-limits sectors. The same forces that seek to defund government and privatize services are dismantling the social safety net and destroying good public sector jobs, driving ever-increasing wealth inequality. This serves as a twin blow for working class communities and communities of color in particular, where people are often more vulnerable to cuts to public services and where public sector jobs are often among the last opportunities for decent wages and benefits. But this also hurts working class white communities, many of whom are dependent on these same services—be it Medicaid, social

security, public schools, or public hospitals. In fact, white workers make up the majority of families who benefit from many of these services (Delaney and Scheller, 2015).

Public sector unions often address some of the same issues at the bargaining table—directly or indirectly—that community organizations are fighting for in corporate and legislative campaigns. Community organizations are often organizing where workers live. The same is often true in the private sector as well. In both cases, working together with community partners these unions can advance the common good, moving beyond reactive, defensive battles toward new approaches rooted in the reality that unions and community-based organizations are actually in the same struggle.

In one example, Luster Howard, Maricruz Manzanarez, and Seth Newton Patel—public sector workers in the University of California state system organized with AFSCME (American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees) Local 3299—wrote about their experiences of introducing racial justice demands into their contract negotiations. They wrote that the supermajority of their members are people of color, and that their coworkers report that they are frequently attacked based on their race or nationality. In addition to individual experiences of discrimination, they identified systemic threats that their members face. They explained that inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, they formed a Racial Justice Working Group in 2014, and created spaces for their members to tell their personal stories about racism and police violence.

In addition, they have been building neighborhood ties by participating in actions and campaigns in the community.

Alongside other unions and community groups, we helped push the Alameda County district attorney to drop charges against 14 leaders in the Black Lives Matter movement, after they had stopped a Bay Area Rapid Transit train in a Black Friday protest. This district attorney had been backed by labor - but we joined leaders from many unions to sit in at her office. Weeks later, the charges were dropped (Howard, et.al., 2017).

In preparing to introduce racial justice demands into their bargaining, they looked to learn from the efforts of other unions in California, for example from hospitality and hotel workers organized with UNITE HERE Local 2 in the private sector. “Local 2 has seen a steady erosion of jobs for African Americans in its hotels, while gentrification is forcing African American workers out of the community. To begin to address this crisis, a decade ago the union won language to increase hiring of African American workers in San Francisco hotels. More recently, the local has helped create a nonprofit called Equality and Inclusion in Hospitality, Inc., that recruits, trains, and places workers of color from ballparks into higher-paid hotel jobs.” Parallel to this effort, community organizations such as Causa Justa and several others are continuing the fight for affordable housing in the city, ensuring that workers from a variety of racial backgrounds can actually live a reasonably commutable distance away from their jobs.

Another example they looked at was the agreement won by an alliance including Jobs with Justice of San Francisco, the National Union of Healthcare Workers, and the California Nurses. This coalition forced Sutter Health, as a condition of getting city approval to build a new hospital—California Pacific Medical Center—to agree to hire at least 40 percent of its entry-level employees through a local community workforce program. This was in addition to a set of community-centered demands that focused on accessibility for patients at the hospital.

Based on these discussions and member surveys, AFSCME 3299 is demanding that the University of California system create local-hire and training programs that would create jobs for low-income people of color who live in the communities near the worksites. They are also demanding that UC make stronger commitments not to collaborate with immigration enforcement—broadening their scope of what they can negotiate about to impact systems of global capital beyond their immediate self-interests (Howard, et.al., 2017).

Public sector workers in other locations have attempted to push the boundaries of what they can collectively bargain over directly at the negotiation table. In Portland, service workers including

librarians, social workers and guards organized with AFSCME Local 328 included demands beyond wages and benefits in their contract negotiations. They asked for translation and interpretation services for the people accessing the services they provided, prayer spaces, gender-neutral bathrooms, multilingual safety training, the establishment of a community-employment committee to work on recruitment, and retention and career development of underrepresented communities, among other things. While these issues are technically outside of the scope of what the National Labor Relations Board says workers can bargain over, they are winning many of their requests by waging a multi-racial, intersectional campaign with community partners.

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) 2012 contract fight is likely one of the most widely followed examples of “bargaining for the common good.” In it, the union argued for proven educational reforms to dramatically improve the education of more than 400,000 students in a district of 675 schools, through increased funding, stronger curriculum for students, better support infrastructure for parents and the surrounding community, quality facilities, equitable treatment of students—particularly those tracked and segregated out of opportunities by race—all while fighting for respect and fair compensation for the profession of teaching.⁷

Again, the union went beyond the traditional scope of bargaining—which directs unions to focus almost exclusively on immediate workplace conditions—and expanded it to include the conditions of their entire community, their broader “workplace”. They included the “common good” in their contract demands, aligning the needs of workers and community members in a multi-racial coalition. And they won big.

Building on this last fall, Black Lives Matter activists joined the CTU one-day strike against cuts to public education and teacher lay-offs. The union made racial segregation and underfunding core elements of their contract fight. “Many of us have either worked or been students in the Chicago Public Schools, or have partners who work for Chicago Public Schools,” said Aislinn Pulley, a leader in the Black Lives Matter chapter when speaking to *Labor Notes* in October 2016. After police shootings, teachers also voted to support an elected police-accountability council. This was not an easy struggle. Some of the union’s members were married to law enforcement, and did not automatically see beyond what felt like a personal attack in order to understand the systemic role of white supremacy and police violence on their students. But the union stuck to it and trusted in their members’ ability to struggle with each other in order to achieve the best conditions for their schools (Fried, 2016).

Learning from the CTU’s experience, unions around the country are beginning to “bargain” around issues workers experience on the job *and* in their surrounding communities far beyond the immediate worksite—including issues of racial discrimination and violence.

Black workers are still facing disproportionate levels of violence at the hands of the employers, police and citizen vigilantes alike—particularly in low-income neighborhoods where those who have jobs are employed by large low-wage employers like McDonalds and Walmart. So it has become commonplace to see large numbers of the same workers at both demonstrations against police brutality and for a fair wage.

Several 21st century movements have integrated the struggle against white supremacy with campaigns for workplace power with profound scalability. In November of 2014, protests in Washington, DC that mobilized in response to the acquittal of Missouri-based Mike Brown’s police murderer managed to shut down a local Walmart store—prompting several retail workers to join in the chants.⁸ Later, the courageous commitment to address anti-Black racism from SEIU’s (Service Employees International Union) Fight for Fifteen effort in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement demonstrated another example. The July 2016 national convention of the Fight for Fifteen workers took place in Richmond, Virginia, to highlight the need for racial justice with the backdrop of the former capital of the confederacy. Fight for Fifteen workers who went on strike in Charlotte, North Carolina also protested the murder of Keith Lamont Scott, a Black father of seven children murdered by police near his home in September 2016. Both movements quickly realized that they could not win one without the other.

Rasheen Wallace, a fast food worker who both leads the Fight for Fifteen in his community and is a member of the Ferguson Commission—established by former US Attorney General Eric Holder to investigate the death of Mike Brown—put it bluntly in his comments to the Jobs With Justice national conference in February 2016.

The Fight for 15 campaign has been giving people their voice back. It has been telling people that you matter and I want you to know that you matter. The Fight for 15 has been giving young people like myself tools and skills to organize within our workplace. ... They have given us the skills to be a leader, not just in this campaign, in other fights, but also in our community. ... In zip code 60105, the majority is African-American, and the median income is \$15,000. In zip code 62105, the majority is white, and the median income is \$90,000. The life expectancy {between these two zip codes} is a 15-year gap. These issues are connected. These issues matter. And we have to look at them like that. We cannot separate them anymore. One thing that was really cool with Ferguson is when we came together we did not know each other. But we kept each other safe (Wallace, 2016).

Since Ferguson, many local cohorts identifying with the Black Lives Matter movement have made the case for this shared struggle. In New York, individuals from both struggles converged again in April 2016 to protest the shooting of unarmed Akai Gurley, the father of a two year old daughter who was shot near his home. Talking to *Think Progress*, one activist affirmed “When you think about the Fight for 15 and you think about Black Lives Matter, it intersects,” said Dawn O’Neal, who traveled to New York from Atlanta to support both movements. “Police violence is usually, predominantly in communities that suffer economic violence. So it goes hand in hand.” Black Lives Matter Bay Area joined fast food, homecare and childcare workers in Oakland in their strike against the fast-food industry in November 2015, stating “As an over-policed and underpaid community, the Fight for 15 is personal for Black people. When we say Black Lives Matter, we are continuing a generations-long struggle for the dignity of Black people everywhere, from the courtroom to the workplace.”⁹

The victories won by this collaborative movement go far beyond the fast food industry, in large part because SEIU decided to focus on a bold demand for its predominantly black worker base, knowing that white workers and other workers of color were equally impacted by such poor standards. The fight for \$15/hour minimum wages flooded cities and states nationwide—including in red states like Greensboro, North Carolina.¹⁰ It became a framework for workers in low wage sectors, the public sector, and even in manufacturing where what used to be good jobs are now low wage—benefiting white workers and workers of color. Making race central to an organizing, bargaining strategy campaign generated momentum and success far beyond their immediate base—in this case, establishing a new floor for what an acceptable minimum livable wage is in the United States.

The Movement for Black Lives, a more formal coalition of organizations supporting the upsurge, released a policy platform,¹¹ clearly outlining the right to organize and collectively bargain as essential to the freedom and security of Black people.

The relationship between Black Lives Matter activists and the Fight for Fifteen campaign is not the only example of a deep understanding and integration of the fight against white supremacy with that for collective bargaining rights.

In a historic action, incarcerated workers throughout the country went on strike—starting with an initial call from workers in three prisons in Alabama on May 1, 2016 led by the Free Alabama Movement—and then spreading to workers in prisons across 11 states. When predominantly black inmates in Alabama took action against inhumane conditions at W.C. Holman Correctional Facility—including forced labor and violence—the prison guards, many who are white, also went on strike in September 2016 over safety concerns and overcrowding. Prisoners called the facility a “Slaughterhouse” given the number of stabbings that occurred. And yet Kinetik Justice, a black inmate and a striker,

supported the situation of the predominantly white guards as well, telling *Democracy Now*, “Officers work 12-hour shifts, from 6:00 to 6:00. There is no third shift, to clear that up” (Goodman, 2016).

These efforts represent real steps at lasting attempts to deeply align and integrate struggles against white supremacy with the goal of expanding bargaining rights for all workers—including re-imagining who is in a position to negotiate and what they can negotiate over—as a part of a larger shared struggle to confront corporate power. Through intensive community and/or workplace organizing campaigns that clarify the real beneficiaries of their condition, white workers understand that the short-term benefit of discrimination against Black workers, immigrants, refugees and Muslims is merely a façade to keep wages low for everyone—including them. Without white supremacy normalizing the practice that black and brown workers should be paid less than white workers, companies would have less incentive to hire workers of color at lower wages. Instead, both white workers and workers of color will be in a position to fight together against employers looking to cut corners, and they could collectively fight for better wages and improved conditions at the worksite and in their communities.

While focusing primarily on the US example here, the same could be said for the global workers’ struggle which is as important—if not more—in the battle to challenge global capitalism. In order to combat global capital, unions and organizations will have to unite across national borders not just in moral solidarity but through shared organizing and bargaining demands on multinational corporations and their government operators. A multinational organizing campaign will require US workers, particularly white workers, to abandon the belief that workers in China, India, Mexico, or Tunisia somehow deserve less because they are not “civilized” . . . aka white/European. Just as with the US framework, this will require organizers to clarify the negative impact of white supremacy not only on the Global South, but on workers in the Global North as well—through a more thorough explanation of what various trade agreements actually do, what the driving forces are, and the ultimate negative impacts to workers on all sides. The Asia Floor Wage Alliance¹² has begun to scratch the surface of campaigns like this, establishing regional living wage mechanisms translatable across countries targeting strategic transnational corporations. The relationships built through these initial campaigns is allowing AFWA unions to partner with many in the US to explore new forms of shared campaigning and eventually bargaining agreements with some of these same companies.

Clarifying workers’ shared self-interests against common, corporate enemies is the only way to motivate white workers who have legitimate worries and fears to act in their shared interests with workers of color, which is actually more aligned than their shared interests with Donald Trump. The parents of children in run-down schools in a predominantly poor white community should align with the parents of similar schools in black and brown communities to confront the individuals in any given county or state who are responsible for underfunding. This should not stop at the school board, but really look at the corporate actors who are benefiting from privatizing public schools. The same can be said for housing, public services, public utilities and jobs in both public and private sectors. Lasting power and shared governance requires us to overcome white supremacy as a central strategy.

The current political catastrophe may actually be an opportunity for unions and community organizations to rise from the quagmire of the past century to build a new workers’ movement, intentionally choosing campaigns and campaign targets that align the shared self-interests of white workers, black workers and workers of color against systems of white supremacy and corporate control.

April 4, 2017 marked the 49th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He was killed while leveraging the legitimacy of the civil rights movement to the aid of black Memphis sanitation workers. On this day, the Movement for Black Lives and workers organized with the Fight for Fifteen took shared action in several cities across the country to continue demonstrating the need for deep collaboration.¹³ So many individuals require both struggles to succeed in order to live with dignity and have security for their families.

This is not just a matter of confronting white supremacy and corporate power because it is right, but about how not doing so will guarantee defeat. It is, in itself, the strategy for building the lasting power working people need to win. Treating the battle against white supremacy as an extra project that

could be compromised when needed is like removing the sails from a boat. It would continue for a while until it stops and is inevitably sunk by a large wave.

An understanding of this is what made the UAW successful against Ford in 1941, a fight that with other industrial unions led to an entirely new framework for collective bargaining in the United States. The current struggles noted here and many more to come have the same potential in this moment in history—to build a 21st century labor movement and framework for bargaining that meets the new needs of today's workers of all backgrounds. And through that, today's generation of workers can surpass labor leaders of past eras in setting society on a path towards altering the global economy in a lasting and meaningful way.

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- 1 The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 2016 union density continued to plunge from 2015 with 10.7% of Americans in unions and only 6.4% in the private sector. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm> (accessed May 30, 2017).
 - 2 A fairly detailed outline of the UAWs last contract with General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler can be found in Rothstein, 2015.
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 - 4 Again, see Bureau of Labor Statistics latest account of union density <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm> (accessed May 30, 2017).
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 - 11 See <https://policy.m4bl.org/platform/> (accessed May 30, 2017).
 - 12 See <http://asia.floorwage.org/> (accessed May 30, 2017).
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