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Introduction to Section on Labor and Social Justice by Section Editor Kim Scipes

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Introduction to Section on Labor and Social Justice by Section Editor Kim Scipes

Abstract

An introduction to this Special Issue of *Class, Race and Corporate Power* on "Labor and Social Justice" by its editor, Kim Scipes. This is a two-part series, with the second edition to be released in the October, 2017 issue of *CRCP*.

Keywords

Social Justice, Social Justice Unionism

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The situation of the US labor movement today—as exemplified by the AFL-CIO—is in terrible shape. The CIO (ultimately, Congress of Industrial Organizations), once foreseen as the hope of progressives across the country—as Staughton Lynd (2017) writes, “It was the great hope of my parents’ generation”—is now largely forgotten, as is the AFL (American Federation of Labor); their merger in 1955, supposedly to unite the House of Labor, is a social justice dream long gutted.

Whether seen positively or negatively by others, the labor movement today is a non-entity for most young people. Rarely taught about labor history in school or about the many contributions to the well-being of Americans—including being the force that created the majority of the “middle class” in the post-World War II United States (Metzgar, 2000)—it is not even on most young people’s radars. For example, in the 13 years I have taught for Purdue University in Northwest Indiana, and being well-known as a labor scholar, I have never been able to attract enough students to teach a single class on labor. And this is in an area where many families have members who have worked in the steel industry and who have been members of the United Steelworkers or other unions, so many of my students have personally benefitted from growing up in union families. The response: zilch.

Others have been more successful in other parts of the country, and I applaud their efforts. Still, I have seen little evidence nationwide that most young people know or care about the labor movement. And that is not a good state of affairs.

For those younger people who have become activists over the years in struggles for LGBTQ rights, women’s rights, animal rights, or in movements like Black Lives Matters or Occupy Wall Street, many want to support labor. And some do, such as by joining United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) or related projects. Some of these are important efforts. Yet when they find out about the AFL-CIO’s overseas activities in general—helping to overthrow democratically elected governments, supporting labor movements that support dictators, undermining progressive governments (see Scipes, 2010, 2012), and earning the sobriquet of AFL-CIA—many respond in disgust; and this oftentimes gets transferred to domestic labor struggles.

And in a time when younger people are becoming more and more aware of global climate change and environmental destruction (see Scipes, 2017), they anger when they see the AFL-CIO leadership oppose efforts by the Standing Rock peoples to defend the water and the planet, implicitly arguing that a relative few construction jobs is more important than human survival.

Whether the labor movement is as weak as many claim or not, one thing seems for certain: it has lost any “aura” of being a force for economic and social justice. And yet, improving Americans’ standards of living has been its one claim to fame, and this has positively affected millions of Americans. When people ignore contributions such as this, I think it is safe to say that there is serious trouble in labor-land.

When Ronald Cox and Nelson Bass—respectively, Editor in Chief and Managing Editor of *Class, Race and Corporate Power*—approached me with a proposal late in 2016, I was immediately interested: they asked me if I would pull together an issue of CRCP on “labor and social justice.” I jumped at the opportunity, knowing I could do a good job but, more importantly, believing that addressing this issue is absolutely crucial for the future of organized labor. My extensive experience in and around the labor movement meant I knew many of the key activists and organizations, especially in the US, and I thought I could persuade many experienced activists/thinkers to contribute. It might be helpful if I share some of my experiences.

For over 30 years, I have been involved in the labor movement in a number of different aspects. I am a long-time labor activist, having been an active rank-and-file member in three different unions, most importantly as a printer in the Graphic Communications International Union, AFL-CIO, but also as a high school teacher (National Education Association), and a graduate research assistant at the University of Wisconsin (American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO). I have been active in pro-labor community organizations, both in the San Francisco Bay Area (six and one half years) and in Northwest Indiana (13

months), serving as a Steering Committee member in the former, and Executive Director in the latter. I spent 1981 and 1982 working as a printer in Tennessee and Kentucky, trying to organize print shops from the inside. I have been an elected labor official, as two-term chair (2011-2015) of the Chicago Chapter of the National Writers Union (NWU), and therefore a member of the NWU's National Executive Board. I have been writing about labor in the US and in a number of countries around the world since the mid-1980s. Following a 2003 Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) on unionization of the steel and meatpacking industries in the Chicago area (including Northwest Indiana) between 1933 and 1955, and how each addressed racial oppression in the workplace, union and community, I have been employed as a sociologist at a regional campus of Purdue University in Northwest Indiana since Fall 2004.

Being a global labor scholar, my work is fairly well-known. I have published three books to date on labor movements: one on the *Kilusang Mayo Uno* (KMU) Labor Center of the Philippines in 1996; one on the foreign policy of the AFL-CIO in 2010; and an edited collection on building global labor solidarity, including writers from the US, Argentina, Canada, and Germany, in 2016. I have served as the North American representative of the British-based journal, *International Labour Reports*, from 1984-89. Altogether, I've published over 200 articles and book reviews, mostly on labor and the global economy (for articles, many linked, go to <https://faculty.pnw.edu/kim-scipes/publications/#2>). I've spoken widely around the world, and have been the plenary/opening night/key note speaker respectively at conferences in Germany, South Africa, and Vietnam. I have been active in (and one of the founders of) the Labor and Labor Movements Section of the American Sociological Association, and I was elected at the World Congress of Sociology meeting in Durban, South Africa to serve on the Board of Research Committee 44 (on Labor) of the International Sociological Association, serving from 2006-2010.

So, with my experiences and connections, I sallied forth to find people who I thought could contribute to this issue. Early on, I made the choice to invite only people who have significant experience on the ground in and/or around the labor movement: there is a world of difference between people who live their experiences and think/write about them—with some, like myself, currently working as academics—and people who only research labor (no matter how valuable it is).

I also wanted to cast my net widely. I wanted to go beyond the “usual suspects” who are well-known for their writing, and seek people less well-known nationally, but who have been doing good work. I also wanted my pool of writers to be as diverse as possible, so besides including white males, I sought women and men of all colors, of different sexual orientations, of different ages and experiences, different union experiences (some staffers, usually out of the membership, as well as long-time rank-and-filers) in different unions [in industries such as construction, manufacturing, logistics, service (hospitals and teaching)], as well as those with extensive community experience as well as in the workplace, and from different parts of the country.

Ultimately, I invited 39 people to contribute, mostly from across the United States but five were from Canada. Most were people who I had met over the years and whose work I knew, or whose writing I was familiar with, but several were people with whom I had no previous connection but whom had been recommended to me by someone I had initially solicited. Thinking that people would be excited to have the opportunity to contribute to a group project around a single theme—one that hopefully would have greater impact than a single article—I expected to have more submissions than could be accepted.

For better or worse, that didn't happen: a large number of people simply said they were too busy with their current work to take on a serious project such as this. For example, none of the Canadians were able to contribute, and the people who ultimately contributed were much less diverse than I had hoped.

However, I also sought contributions from two different organizations whose work I think is important—*Labor Notes* and US Labor Against the War (USLAW). I have been a subscriber and have attended a number of *Labor Notes* conferences over the years in the San Francisco Bay Area, Detroit and Chicago. I attended the founding conference of USLAW in Chicago, and at least two subsequent national conferences, in Chicago and most recently, in Washington, DC. Both organizations have published some of my work. I really hoped that each of these organizations would use this occasion to consider thoughtfully their past work with a self-critical perspective, and suggest how we in the labor movement

could learn from their experiences so as to further develop our work. Unfortunately, neither organization chose to contribute to this collection.¹

Nonetheless, the four articles that have been accepted and appear in this issue—the other articles are scheduled for the October 2017 issue—are thoughtful and well-written, and are very worthy of your consideration. This is, in my opinion, a strong collection.

I sought quality and thoughtful work, demanding clear thinking and good writing. I didn't put any restrictions on such work: each author was encouraged to write on something they were passionate about, and it didn't matter whether I agreed with them or not. (Nor were they required to agree with what I contributed.) Accordingly, unless they indicate otherwise, each author is only responsible for their own work. They were not limited to one set of politics or another: some are Marxists of one sort or the other, while others are not Marxists, so we have a range of politics. I worked with each author to help them express her/his thoughts most clearly—eventually, each person wrote at least two versions of their paper, and a couple, more than that. After their articles were finalized, I put them into a common style, and sent them to each author to make sure I had not messed anything up in changing styles. In short, everyone made a major effort to produce the best work they could.

So, without further delay, I want to introduce the articles in this collection, of which four appear herein, with the remainder to appear in the October issue of CRCP.

We begin with an article by Staughton Lynd titled “John L. Lewis and His Critics: Some Forgotten Labor History That Still Matters Today.” Lynd, whose experiences go *far* beyond those modestly listed in his included biography, argues that it was top-down leadership instituted by John L. Lewis that was the major weakness in the CIO, and interestingly, he then considers its effects on subsequent community organizing icons Saul Alinsky and Cesar Chavez and their work.

Following Lynd, we present an article by Erica Smiley, currently the organizing director of Jobs with Justice. In “Time to Tackle the Whole Squid: Confronting White Supremacy to Build Shared Bargaining Power,” she addresses the need to confront white supremacy in our organizing, arguing that it hurts white workers as well as workers of color. Perhaps most interesting in her approach to this subject, Smiley really understands how badly white workers have been screwed over themselves, but argues that until they can rid themselves of their racial ideology, they will be unable to join with workers of color—who have been hurt worse—to create the power necessary to begin addressing their generally common situations.

Then we go to an article by Vincent Emanuele. Emanuele, a US Marine combat veteran of the US war in Iraq who subsequently turned around, focuses on his experiences growing up in a labor household—his father was an ironworker and active member of Ironworkers #1 in Chicago for most of his life until hurt on the job. Although currently a member of the National Writers Union, Emanuele looks at labor from a much broader viewpoint than is usually provided in “The Good, the Bad, the Ugly: A Lifetime with Labor”—and this from the perspective of a 33-year old community organizer from Michigan City, Indiana.

Following Emanuele's article is my own. For those who are aware of my work, it shouldn't come as a surprise that my article, “The Epic Failure of Labor Leadership in the United States, 1980-2017 and Continuing,” takes a very critical look at the leadership of the AFL-CIO. However, I look at the leadership problems of the labor movement as being more than individual, arguing they are systematic, and a product of business unionism. Along with that, I argue that instead of keeping AFL-CIO overseas operations separate from those in the US—as is overwhelmingly done—labor activists must confront the US Empire and the nationalism on which it is based in order to build a powerful labor movement here at home to better the lives of people in this country and around the world.

In short, four very provocative articles that we hope will stimulate your mind and generate conversations with allies, and responses over time. We need good thinking in the labor movement, as we do in every movement. Labor has an important role to play in the future of our country, IF it will take off the blinders, critically examine its past, build its organizations on shop floors, in hospitals and in retail outlets, and work with community groups across the country to help build a country in which we each want to live. Or it can slide into obscurity, with few lamenting its demise. The choice will be made by activists across the country who call the labor movement “mine.”

We want to work with those of you who are serious.

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1 While I recognize some of the people solicited to contribute were, unquestionably, overloaded with work, I have to wonder if some stayed away because of who was editing the collection—myself. I think it's fair to say that my personal reputation within the US labor movement is controversial, and especially because of my book (Scipes, 2010) on the AFL-CIO foreign policy program, which exposed a lot of the AFL-CIO's "dirt." So be it. I wouldn't want anyone tainted for association with me.

I would hope, however, that others with more pristine reputations than mine will take critical looks at the AFL-CIO and its related organizations and—whether in articles, monographs or as part of edited collections—publish their findings, their observations, etc. The labor movement today is in terrible shape and if we are going to "straighten it out," and make it a force for social and economic justice that many of us desire or expect, then this must be with the aid of rigorous examination of its strengths and weaknesses. People other than myself are going to have to pick up the cudgel and ask the hard questions, seek solutions and verify answers. I don't think I'm going too far when I say that members and/or supportive intellectuals must do this—to date, there is absolutely no indication that top-level leadership will do a public self-criticism that is way too long overdue.