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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 the second part of a two-part series, with the first being available [here](#).

Keywords

Social Justice, US Labor Movement, Organized Labor

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Welcome to Part II of the special section on “US Labor and Social Justice.” This is a continuation of the original section—see Scipes, 2017c—and completes the set of articles begun in the July 2017 issue, addressing additional issues that our authors feel deserve serious attention, especially by members and supporters of the labor movement.

In Part I—on-line at <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatpower/vol5/iss2/> --we had four people discuss issues important to them, giving us a number of approaches to the problems of the US labor movement. We had articles on the problems of top-down organization (by Staughton Lynd), the need to organize against white supremacy to build power to make social changes (Erica Smiley), an understanding of the benefits and disadvantages of growing up in a union household (Vincent Emanuele), and an argument that US labor leaders had abandoned workers in the United States so as to support the US Empire (Kim Scipes).

In this issue, Part II, we continue this discussion. We begin with an article by Meizhu Lui who examines practices in a left-led local hospital union in the Boston area in the early 1970s. She starts with the argument: “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?’”

Then she points out: “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.” She systematically develops her argument.

From there, Peter Olney focuses on an effort to get workers to understand and support politicians operating in their longer-term interests. In a provocative essay, he argues that the unions need to organize within their own ranks, and in the parts of the country where Trump won his votes. He focuses on efforts to do such.

And Steve Zeltzer looks at the failure of the labor movement to address the mainstream media, and its unwillingness to create even a labor web channel. Zeltzer’s argument is important, because he understands that labor cannot assume that working people will support it automatically, but that the labor movement must fight to win people to its side; however, he recognizes that should labor do that, they can win the support of many people, both inside and outside of current unions.

(And should it need to be said, I have not shared these comments with any of the other authors, so they bear no responsibilities for the comments within this article unless they specifically indicate such.)

Now, obviously, the articles in this and the preceding issue are not all the issues facing the labor movement: the labor movement is actually in really deep trouble, and facing a multitude of issues, although one would never know it by the way our “leaders” are acting. (And the re-election of Richard Trumka and his administration at the AFL-CIO National Convention in St. Louis in late October 2017 illustrates this point perfectly: as Alfred E. Neuman says, “What, Me Worry?”)

The larger issue, I believe, is that no one in formal leadership is willing to “think big,” to think outside of the box, and to try to solve problems before they manifest further: what if elite programs that are trying to dominate the rest of the world are attacking American workers so that the elites have the resources to try to do this—and why should we donate our young men and women to fight their wars? What if capitalism cannot provide jobs for everyone—and I’m not even talking about “good jobs,” but jobs of any kind for all? Why is our income inequality so extreme and increasing? And what are we going to do about climate change...?

Burying one’s head in the sand until the rising waters drown your ass is not an option: if you are a labor leader, you are supposed to look out for the well-being of your members—at the very least—if not for all working people in this country. Let me make this clear: burying your head in the sand is not a viable option.

When is the last time you have seen a national-level labor leader at a labor conference, engaging in discussions about important issues and participating as an equal, and not there just to give a speech and disappear, often without even taking questions? The only time I can remember this is when the elected

President of the United Electrical workers (UE), Peter Knowlton, participated in the 2016 National Assembly of US Labor Against the War (USLAW). It was nice to see that challenging wars and related costs—social and financial—were issues that Knowlton felt important, and he participated as an equal; he wasn't afraid of all those mean, ol' activists who might think differently than him. And what he found—at least from my perspective—was that people were delighted to have him there, who listened to him respectfully, and who responded likewise. It enriched the entire proceedings. We activists also got a view from a different level than most of us have access to, so it helped us as well.

But do I have to make the point that the UE is not a member of the AFL-CIO? I've never had an experience like that with an AFL-CIO national leader; others probably have, but with as many labor-related conferences as I attend, you would think there would be at least one who attended and participated as an equal. If one was at one of the conferences I attended, he or she damn sure never make their presence known to me or those around me!

Yet, we have some issues that are facing working people particularly—way beyond just labor union members—and the American people in general. Four come immediately to mind: (1) the incredible draining of resources that American workers need yet are channeled off into elite programs to try to maintain US dominance in the world; (2) lack of jobs and (3) increasing income inequality, obviously linked, and (4) climate change with associated environmental devastation. (I'm sure others can think of additional ones needing to be addressed).

The first issue is a big one. As I argued in [Part I](#) of this Special Issue (Scipes, 2017d), based on my extensive research presented in my second book (Scipes, 2010), the top level labor leadership of the AFL-CIO has been carrying out a foreign policy that seeks to help the US dominate the world, while allowing resources needed by American working people to be spent on this reactionary foreign policy (see McCoy, 2017). That \$700 billion being channeled into the war department by Trump—I refuse to call it “defense”—is money being spent that can't be used to support education, establish quality health care, revitalize our infrastructure, address climate change, etc.

I know there are good union people working in the war industries, making all kinds of war equipment, but we have to turn this production into items that enhance human beings' lives, not kill them, and we have to build on the skills of these workers to make it happen. As far as I know, this issue—of military conversion—hasn't been talked about seriously in the labor movement since the 1980s: why not?

And why, as we have been in war since 2001, does less than 1% of the US public carry the burden of this insanity? And for what reason? And why does the US have something like 800 bases around the world: the Chinese have only one as far as I know, and yet the elites want us to fear China.

Especially regarding the second and third issues—lack of jobs and increasing income inequality—labor leaders have the legitimacy to speak on these issues, and I think many Americans are actually wondering why they are “missing in action”; why aren't they speaking out? Now, these labor leaders may not address the income inequality facing women and people of color—unfortunately, labor leaders have historically avoided these issues, leaving them for various community organizations and activists to do so—but at very least, they should be addressing the lack of jobs and especially the widespread and increasing income inequality among Americans overall. And they have not done so, and especially not in any sustained and ongoing manner. How is this helping their own union members, much less all American workers?

When there are widespread, on-going and sustained problems in these areas—and I've personally been chronicling them since 1984 (see Scipes, 1984, 2009) and trying to bring them to people's attention—and labor leaders refuse to address them, how does this inspire confidence in labor leaders?

And what about climate change? Not only do 97% of all climate scientists in the world argue this is happening, but growing numbers of Americans are beginning to recognize this. With the hurricanes hitting the US this year (including Puerto Rico), the wildfires in the western US, the glaciers calving off of Antarctica, the rising oceans, etc., etc., something is going on. The change is so incredible that scientists have concluded that the Earth is entering a new geological epoch called “The Anthropocene” (Angus, 2016), where human impact is now having a greater effect on the planet than natural processes. And where are our labor leaders on *this* issue? (For one attempt to address this, see Scipes, 2017b.)

And despite whatever personal attributes that each of our labor leaders may have, however—and how others might classify them—the impact is even more limiting; not only are they afraid to admit to recognizing these problems (at least publicly), but they don't want anyone else to admit to them, either. There is almost no serious discussion of these issues within much of the labor movement as far as I can tell, and truthfully, there seems to be little discussion of these issues even among labor activists except, perhaps, those in and around USLAW and possibly those around *Labor Notes*. To even publicly discuss or disseminate such discussions—such as by e-mail lists—is to risk one's personal standing within the US labor movement. (I know some small groups of long-time friends will sometimes discuss these issues, but heaven forbid they get out beyond the small group!)

While many activists condemn the McCarthy period in US society, they don't seem to recognize that that same issue—ideological suppression of discussion of issues unacceptable to the formal leadership, especially in public—currently exists in the labor movement. So, not only is the labor movement in deep do-do, but we can't even talk about it so we can figure out how best to try to address it. What could possibly be wrong with this?

Can we say “Donald Trump”? This is a man who is an abomination to many of the values, efforts and struggles of working people, now and historically. He professed that he “understood” working people, and their struggles, and some of them—actually, millions of them—bought his shtick and voted for him. He's going to “Make America Great Again”—oh, happy days!

But where were those labor leaders, with their educated and mobilized members, to get in his face, and point out that not only was he a liar, but he was full of crap; that even if he honestly wanted to help American workers, he could not, because changes in our economy are structural and are not the result of poor policy decisions, one way or the other, by this president or that? They were nowhere to be seen.

Labor leaders' only solution: vote for Hillary Clinton, a war criminal and favorite of Wall Street. She's obviously going to provide real solutions. Right. She followed eight years of Barack Obama who, despite his first election being dependent on the labor movement, betrayed labor leaders in many ways, and most importantly in failing to fight for the terribly-named Employee Free Choice Act. Other than some important, albeit limited changes made through the Affordable Care Act (aka “Obamacare”—they are different names for the same program), Obama really did nothing for American workers after he opened the money spigots to save us from the economic tragedy of George W. Bush. He never addressed the jobs issue, nor the income inequality issues. And Queen Hillary wanted to give us another four years of Obama's policies. Yippee.

But our labor “leaders” obviously thought she had all of the necessary answers; after all, they gave her over \$200 million for her campaign (see Zeltzer, 2017).

I don't know if they even tried, but they obviously didn't convince Clinton of the need to campaign in Wisconsin during the general election. Hell, despite state-wide mobilizations in support of labor in Madison during the first part of 2011—with a couple of mobilizations of 150,000 people or more, in a city of only 220,000—labor leaders had snatched victory out of the hands of working people, and these “leaders” brilliant work led to the re-election and continuation of the assault on labor by the right-wing governor Scott Walker (for a discussion, see Scipes, 2017a). Walker, who would—as anyone with an ounce of sense should have recognized—and did, mobilized his considerable resources to help Trump win this important state. But Clinton didn't think it was important to campaign in Wisconsin....

But this infatuation with Democratic presidential candidates isn't a new thing by any means. Another example of their brilliant work that I personally can attest to—and I'm not a labor “insider” or anything like that, so my experiences are quite limited—is that I accompanied Frank Emspak to a meeting with the AFL-CIO political director at the Washington headquarters in 2004. Emspak was seeking funding for the Workers' Independent News Service (WINS at the time, but later changed to WIN)—he had started a daily independent news service to feed stories to the media across the country from a pro-labor/pro-worker perspective, and he was seeking some funding from the AFL-CIO. The political director, whose name I've forgotten over the years, generously provided him with a \$5,000 grant, while the AFL-CIO gave something like \$55 million to the presidential campaign of that champion of labor

rights, John Kerry. Instead of using some of that money to help build a labor media infrastructure that would continue and hopefully expand over the coming years—getting word out about workers’ issues, concerns and perspectives—they flushed it down the drain, trailing a neo-liberal Democrat who couldn’t even beat George W. Bush. Sad.

In short, we have a crisis of leadership in the labor movement. While there may be a few national unions taking on important issues (such as the National Nurses Union and their efforts to get a nation-wide single payer health care program enacted), and while a few local unions and maybe some labor councils are addressing serious issues, the reality is these are exceptions, and not the norm. This lack of leadership has hurt the legitimacy of the labor movement as a whole, and many young people do not see the importance, the viability or the necessity of a labor movement.

Endorsing political candidates, especially traditional Democrats, is not seen as the way forward; a growing number of people, especially younger ones, are aware of the problems that we face and they are looking for ways and means to address them. Candidates who accept neo-liberal capitalism, who attack women and people of color, and who ignore the increasing problems of our country—regardless of party—are not seen as solutions.

Among the young, there is an increasing dissatisfaction with “capitalism” which, from what I can see, includes not only a lack of hope of ever achieving anything like the “American Dream,” but a rejection of trying to dominate the world and a recognition that we must attack the problem of climate change and environmental destruction.

The unwillingness to address those issues in a substantive manner is moving the US labor movement closer and closer to social irrelevancy, despite its’ numbers, especially with younger people. It’s a situation that the labor movement ignores at its own peril.

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