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Why Labor and the Movement for Racial Justice Should Work Together

BY [Maurice Weeks and Marilyn Sneiderman](#)

The Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) has made tremendous strides in exposing and challenging racial injustice, and has won real policy victories. The policies, while often imperfect, are a testament to the strength of the organizing and activism of the moment. Not coincidentally, this uprising comes at a time when income and wealth inequality are at peak levels and the economy for most black people looks markedly different than the economy for their white counterparts.

Just as we are in a critical moment in the movement for racial justice, we are in a critical moment for the right to unionize. Unions, which have been a major force for economic justice for people of color in the past 50 years, have been decimated to historically low levels.

Labor should work alongside the Movement for Black Lives, a coalition with more than 50 organizations, to usher in a radically new economic and social order. The path won't be easy. But recent history has shown that one of the ways to get at this new reality is through union bargaining. Consider the example of Fix L.A.

Fix L.A. is a community-labor partnership that fought to fund city services and jobs alike, using city workers' bargaining as a flashpoint to bring common good demands to the table. The coalition started after government leaders in Los Angeles drastically cut back on public services and infrastructure maintenance during the Great Recession. The city slashed nearly 5,000 jobs, a large portion of which had been held by black and Latino workers. Not only did these cuts create infrastructure problems—like overgrown and dangerous trees and flooding—but they also cost thousands of black and Latino families their livelihoods.

Fix L.A. asked why the city was spending more on bank fees than on street services, and demanded that it renegotiate those fees and invest the savings in underserved communities.

What was the result of this groundbreaking campaign?

The creation of 5,000 jobs, with a commitment to increase access to those jobs for black and Latino workers, the defeat of proposed concessions for city workers and a commitment from the city to review why it was prioritizing payment of bank fees over funding for critical services in the first place!

Bargaining for the common good

Fix L.A. may seem novel, but the context is no different from many places. We have seen massive disinvestment from public services in a way that disproportionately affects black people. This structurally-racist disinvestment is often driven by the corporate interests that bankroll elected officials' campaigns and by Wall Street actors that use their influence over

public finance to push an austerity agenda. Everywhere you look, public officials are making a choice between paying fees and providing critical services.

Chicago Public Schools paid \$502 million to banks in toxic swap fees at the same time that it was slashing special education programs and laying off teachers to close a budget deficit. Detroit raised its water rates and paid \$537 million in Wall Street penalties, setting the stage for mass water shutoffs when tens of thousands of poor residents of the overwhelmingly black city could not afford the higher water bills.

Wall Street and other corporations don't hesitate to profit off of and perpetuate disinvestment in communities of color, and too often we forget to look up the food chain to see that at the other end of community crises there are rich bankers and billionaires lining their pockets. Campaigns, like Fix L.A., that involve direct actions targeting banks, hedge funds, corporations and billionaires are effective.

This sort of organizing can be hard. In order to isolate workers from their broader communities, the other side has done a terrific job of narrowly defining the scope of bargaining as wages and benefits. In many states, labor laws prohibit public sector workers from bargaining over issues that concern the welfare of the broader community or the quality of the services they provide.

The theory of "bargaining for the common good" seeks to challenge this status quo. As articulated by Joseph McCartin of Georgetown University's Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor, bargaining for the common good has three main tenets: 1) transcending the bargaining frameworks written in law and rejecting them as tools for the corporate elite to remain in power; 2) crafting demands between local community groups and unions at the same time and in close coordination with each other from the very beginning; and 3) embracing collective direct action as key to the success of organizing campaigns.

These may seem like simple ideas, but they stand in complete opposition to the way the power elite expects union bargaining to be done. Therein lies their power.

Therein also lies the opportunity for unions to partner with the Movement for Black Lives. For all of their complicated racial histories, unions are some of the largest organizations of black people in the country. About 2.2 million black Americans are union members—some 14 percent of the employed black workforce.

That's a huge number of black people who are already members of organizations with the capacity to organize and mobilize. And these black workers, like all black people in America, face real challenges of structural economic racism in almost all aspects of their lives. Their communities have been underfunded; their schools are being dismantled; they face massive poverty and are under economic assault; and they regularly encounter police violence.

Stronger together

Widening the scope of bargaining in Los Angeles led to real wins for the city's black and Latino communities. The rest of the labor movement should take note. Imagine the power that could be added to the Movement for Black Lives if unions, recognizing the trauma that systematic racism wreaks on their membership, brought solutions that have been elevated by the Movement for Black Lives to the bargaining table in negotiations with employers ranging from the City of Baltimore to private equity giant Blackstone.

But unions cannot do this unilaterally and expect unconditional support from the black community.

Unions must make the effort on the front end to build a real relationship with Movement for Black Lives groups and members, and partner with them in developing common good bargaining demands that start to go on the offense against Wall Street and the structurally-

racist economic power structure. There are groups of people organizing for racial justice under the banner of the Movement for Black Lives near every union local in the country. The onus is on labor leaders and rank-and-file union members to reach out to those groups and start to build a strong relationship where one does not exist. This process will not be easy, especially because of the history of racism that plagues unions, especially police unions. But the truth remains that there is a real opportunity to leverage the power of both movements to win real gains for black people and other people of color through a strong partnership.

It is exciting to imagine potential bargaining demands major unions could undertake alongside racial justice organizations. For example, they could demand that their employers make a commitment to job training programs to strengthen the pipeline for black workers; city and state workers could demand progressive taxation measures that raise funds from corporate actors to fund schools and services in black communities; teachers could demand school districts enact restorative justice policies to stem the school-to-prison pipeline; hospital workers could bargain for targeted health care access programs in communities of color; retail workers could demand that their employers “ban the box” and let the formerly incarcerated work. The list is almost infinite.

Bargaining for racial justice is a radical idea and will not be easily won. It will require concerted direct action targeting the real decision makers in both the public and private sectors that have a vested interest in keeping racial inequities in place. The Movement for Black Lives has proven that it can execute effective and creative direct actions backed by solid demands. They are also innovating creative tactics that move beyond traditional marches and picket lines to new types of disruptive actions that make power holders directly confront those they are harming. By combining the vision and militant tactics of the Movement for Black Lives with the membership and resources of the labor movement, we can usher in a more just and equitable society.

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