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In Wake of Charlottesville, How Can Unions Fight for Racial Justice?

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How should unions respond to the chilling events in Charlottesville? As believers that “an injury to one is an injury to all,” what’s our special responsibility? Can we survive if our own unions are split along racial lines?

Labor Notes looked

through our recent coverage to find examples of unions that are proactively working for racial justice. The excerpts below show steps some locals are taking to help members learn from each other and fight discrimination right on the job. Many began after the recent wave of police shootings of unarmed Black men.

At the end see links to stories about unions allying with racial justice groups in the community, too. If you have more examples you’d like to share with us, send them to dan@labornotes.org.

TWIN CITIES UNIONS RESPOND TO POLICE VIOLENCE

by Alexandra Bradbury and Samantha Winslow, July 21, 2016

Philando Castile, an African American man who was shot and killed by a police officer at a traffic stop July 6, 2016, was a member of Teamsters Local 320 in the Twin Cities.

The union issued a brief statement expressing grief over his death. It’s a public employees local, representing a handful of police officers—though not the one who killed Castile—as well as corrections officers, campus workers, city workers, bus drivers, and even public defenders, who often find themselves opposing police in court.

The local hasn’t tried to engage members in protest, or even conversation, about racism or police violence. “Our union has traditionally not encouraged member dialogue on any

issues—especially issues as complicated as the relationship between police officer union members and other union members,” said member Bob Kolstad.

“The two groups are very isolated from each other. Local officers are very defensive about criticism of any police officer, even those who are not members. So creating an environment for dialogue on the issue of police misconduct would be very difficult.”

But other Twin Cities unions have been bolder. The two Twin Cities [teachers unions led a march](#) to protest Castile's killing; 21 were arrested.

Castile's death hit close to home for St. Paul educators; he had worked for 14 years in a school cafeteria.

Minneapolis teacher Corinth Matera said she wanted to show students that their teachers recognize what's happening to them outside of school. “Our students experience the same thing every day,” Matera said. “It's important for our union to be out in front on this.”

St. Paul Federation of Teachers Vice President Nick Faber said, “We can't just do zero-tolerance” for student discipline. Faber drew parallels between policing and the harsh discipline that students of color disproportionately face at school. Education activists point to a “school-to-prison pipeline.”

In its latest contract, the teachers union won funding to pilot an alternative approach to discipline. “We are talking about public safety being beyond our classrooms and into the community,” Faber said.

In 2015, members of AFSCME Local 3800 helped organize a rally, “Labor for Justice for Jamar,” after Minneapolis police shot and killed another African American man, Jamar Clark.

Local 3800 represents clerical and technical workers at the University of Minnesota. President Cherrene Horazuk said many members there, too, had personal connections to Castile. Since his death the local has been encouraging members to attend protests and vigils—and to wear their union shirts, to show that this is a union issue.

Horazuk said few members have opposed their local taking a stand. She believes one reason is that, in its contract campaign, the union was already raising racial justice issues, such as the low wages of workers of color on campus, and Muslim workers' fight to get religious holidays off.

So, she said, “it doesn't seem like it's out of the blue.”

HOW TO START TALKING ABOUT RACE IN YOUR UNION

by Alexandra Bradbury, September 23, 2015

[Tensions over whether unions should join](#), oppose, or sit out the Black Lives Matter movement are drawing long-overdue attention to the simmering racial divides inside labor. It's an issue where union members are far from united. In New York, the teachers union supported a march to protest the killing of Eric Garner in Staten Island. In response, some members started a petition calling for the union president to resign.

Some of the objecting teachers had police officers in their families. Others didn't see why their union should mobilize on something unrelated to schools. "[President] Mulgrew is dragging me unwillingly into the current racial and police issues," wrote paraprofessional Diane Morton-Gattullo.

In a logical first step to address these tensions, several unions are launching programs to get members talking to each other—and more important, listening to each other—about race.

One is AFSCME 3299, which represents 22,000 campus and hospital workers in the University of California system.

Executive board member Luster Howard, a truck driver, is active in the union's Racial Justice Working Group, formed in 2014.

Ultimately he hopes the group will help the union contribute to a social movement for racial justice—and tackle on-the-job discrimination, too.

But as a first step, he says, the group quickly realized "before we could mobilize, we had to clean up our own house."

Tips for Useful Conversations

- **Get people talking.** Howard says what made his workshop effective was people were interacting with each other, not listening to a lecture.
- **Ask about feelings first.** In one workshop people reacted to a film, and in the other they reacted to events in the news. Pitts and Howard asked people to start with their emotions, then talk about the values behind them.
- **Make it personal.** When the topic is abstract, people withdraw to their corners. But hearing firsthand stories can break down barriers.
- **Tell your own stories.** In the workshop, Howard described how, five times in six months, he got pulled over during his morning commute without doing anything wrong, just for being a Black man driving through an affluent neighborhood. "People were like 'Ooooh.' They're starting to get it," he said.
- **Draw connections.** "Do you drive?" Howard asked me, and then told the story of how Sandra Bland was pulled over for a minor traffic violation and it escalated into her suicide. "That's something, as a female driver, that you could understand. You build bridges, you find common ground, you try to make it closer to home."

In another workshop, Pitts drew the analogy between African Americans who migrated out of the Jim Crow South and Mexican immigrants who cross the Rio Grande today. “The whole point was, we used to be them,” Howard said. “They’re not taking your job—they’re trying to feed their families just like you are.”

A STARTING PLACE

In fact, when the racial justice group formed, the first response from some union members was, “Why are we doing this?” Howard says.

“It’s funny: a lot of people are uncomfortable speaking about racism. Even at the mention of Black Lives Matter, you see them recoil.”

Some countered that “all lives matter.” “Well, all lives do matter,” Howard says. “If you’re doing a breast cancer walk, that’s not to say that your uncle’s throat cancer doesn’t matter. But this is a breast cancer walk.

“Maybe I’m wrong,” he adds wryly, “but I thought in a union, what affects one person affects us all.”

So the group’s first action was to invite Dr. Steven Pitts, a UC Berkeley labor professor who focuses on issues affecting Black workers, to lead the executive board in a workshop on “Making Our Union Stronger: What Does Black Lives Matter Activism Mean to Us?”

Pitts showed the film “At the River I Stand,” which shows Dr. Martin Luther King’s last battle alongside striking Black sanitation workers in Memphis.

It’s an affecting film; tears were shed. Pitts opened the conversation by asking how it made everyone feel. People talked about prejudices.

It was a starting place, not an endpoint. Howard says he looked around and noticed many people weren’t participating. But in the months since, they’ve started to come around.

GETTING PERSONAL

The next step was a Black Lives Matter workshop at the local’s July 2015 conference for member activists. Howard and Pitts worked together to plan a curriculum that would encourage people to open up and share personal stories.

The workshop drew a diverse crowd of 50-60, standing room only. To begin the conversation, Howard asked people to respond to events in the news, the shootings in Charleston, Ferguson, Oakland, and Texas.

Participants broke into groups of five or six to discuss three questions:

1. How did you feel when you heard of that event?
2. What part of your moral compass did it trigger?
3. What personal experiences shaped that part of your moral compass?

“That’s how you start to get people to open up and talk about their feelings,” Howard says. “When you bring up the topic, people automatically go to their sides.... The bottom line, it’s divide and conquer.”

Members of the Racial Justice Working Group walked around among the groups to listen and answer questions. Though he’s been in the union for 15 years, Howard says, “I learned a lot about people who I thought I knew.”

One woman described how her sister in Florida had suffered a beating so severe she was hospitalized, and only her mother had stopped her from going out to seek violent revenge.

Another man told how he called police to his house, but when they arrived, they beat him up and arrested him, putting him into the hospital and then in jail.

“You could have heard a pin drop in the room,” Howard said. “That was my whole point. You see this person. This isn’t somebody on the news.... It’s not just the Michael Browns, the Freddie Grays, the Oscar Grants, or the Trayvon Martins.

“It’s happening in your backyard. It’s a little different when it’s your brother or sister.”

TAKE IT ON THE ROAD

Next, workshop participants role-played how to get these conversations going back at their own workplaces.

“When you have your union meeting, your local campus meeting, you could start there,” Howard says. Another way is talking one-on-one with co-workers, as he’s been doing with his fellow truck drivers.

“When you spend that much time with a guy or girl in a truck, you do have time to talk,” he said. “So rather than talk about how the Warriors are doing, you talk about this.”

The immediate goal was for people to go back to their campuses and get five people to tell their own stories.

BARGAINING FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

by Luster Howard, Maricruz Manzanarez, and Seth Newton Patel, March 15, 2017

Employers often use race to divide workers against one another. At University of California campuses and hospitals, we're seeing the problem get worse now that President Trump's administration is unleashing new waves of racism and attacks on immigrants.

Our union, AFSCME 3299, represents 24,000 patient care and service workers. About half of us are Latinos, and a supermajority are people of color. Our co-workers report that they're frequently attacked based on their race or nationality.

One manager, for instance, calls Latino workers "slaves." Another told a worker, "If you don't like it here, go back where you came from." Workers recently overheard a supervisor characterize all African American custodians as performing poorly; another supervisor responded, "Give me the Black people, I can straighten them out." In January one of the authors of this piece, targeted as a Latina immigrant, received a death threat on social media.

Workers of color go through countless individual experiences of discrimination like these. Co-workers may accept negative stereotypes, too. Even union activists can play into it, as when an activist insists that members from a particular race or nationality fail to participate in the union. Such divisions end up weakening us all, when winning strong contracts depends on our unity.

Beyond individual experiences of discrimination, we're concerned about systematic threats to members' well-being—especially with the president's new attacks against immigrants and Muslims. In 2009, UC police went beyond what the law required them to do, collaborating with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to detain, deny union representation to, and deport one of our co-workers.

And our members have observed the number of African American workers decreasing over the years, even while UC is growing.

This spring [2017] our union is going into bargaining again. Here are a few steps we've taken to set our bargaining tables to advance racial justice:

OPEN UP CONVERSATIONS

As described above, in 2014 we formed a Racial Justice Working Group. What moved leaders was hearing their fellow members share, "This is how my sister was beat up by cops without cause," or "This is how many times I get stopped in this rich neighborhood on my way to work," or "Here are the scars on my body from the bullets fired by cops."

These stories really changed the tenor of the discussion inside our union. It was no longer, "Why are we talking about this issue?"

So we structured our workshops to center on these stories—but also to include brainstorming for action. Members facilitated workshops across the local, beginning with the executive board itself, then at our annual Member Action Team conference, then on local campuses.

Meanwhile we reconvened an Immigration Committee that's been active on and off for over a decade. The two committees have begun to work together on new local-wide workshops and to demand sanctuary campuses, asking the university to refuse to collaborate with ICE to target undocumented immigrants.

Swinging into Action

Besides member education, our union has been building community ties by participating in labor contingents at marches and joining coalition campaigns for racial justice.

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 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.

Another campaign is in Richmond, California, where UC Berkeley plans to develop a new campus. We helped form the labor-community coalition Raise Up Richmond to fight for a community benefits agreement, where a developer makes specific commitments before getting permission to build.

We're asking UC Berkeley to commit to hire and train disadvantaged local residents, which would create jobs for many low-income African Americans and other people of color who live near the site. We're also asking for a "fair-chance" policy to ensure that no applicant is denied a job simply because of a prior criminal conviction.

Since Trump's election, members have joined local coalitions for sanctuary campuses. Our union worked with the Students Association and other campus unions to draft expansive sanctuary demands, asking the UC president, chancellors, and CEOs to take steps not only to protect immigrant workers and students but also to prevent police violence and sexual violence on campus and not to cooperate with any Muslim registry. To back these demands we have so far held a dozen delegations simultaneously at all our campuses and hospitals.

We've also joined with other Bay Area unions, worker centers, and community organizations in a rapid-response network called Bay Resistance. This network has already generated big turnout for protests against the president's anti-immigrant executive order, Cabinet nominees, and ICE raids. Locally it's a way for our union to get more members plugged in.

SEEK OUT EXAMPLES

As we prepared to introduce racial justice demands into our bargaining, the three of us set out to learn from other California unions' efforts. We interviewed folks at UNITE HERE Local 2, at AFSCME Council 36, and at Jobs with Justice.

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.

Meanwhile in Los Angeles, a coalition of unions in 2014 won a contract requiring the city to hire 5,000 new workers and target these job opportunities to underrepresented communities, often communities of color.

Community organizations got involved in formulating the campaign demands, which included pushing the city to raise money for city services by renegotiating investment-banking fees and reducing tax-dodging in commercial real estate. L.A. eventually agreed to create a commission to find ways to increase revenue.

A third inspiration was the agreement won by an alliance including Jobs with Justice San Francisco, the National Union of Healthcare Workers, and the California Nurses. They forced Sutter Health, as a condition of getting city approval to build a new hospital, to agree to hire at least 40 percent of its entry-level employees through a local community workforce program.

In each case, community and civil rights groups provided crucial leadership, pushing the unions to make racial justice a priority.

MAKE DEMANDS

Our joint bargaining team for the two contracts is made up of 21 hospital and campus workers. We surveyed members for three months and met several times as a team to draft and finalize our proposals.

In February 2017 we were ready to present our demands. At every UC hospital and campus, delegations of 10-100 members showed up unannounced to present our opening proposals to the local CEOs and chancellors.

Besides ending outsourcing, improving job security, protecting benefits, and increasing wages, we're proposing to create local-hire and training programs for disadvantaged workers and to ensure that UC follows "fair-chance" hiring procedures.

We're also proposing to expand our existing immigrant rights language. In a past contract campaign we won nondiscrimination provisions that restrict UC's ability to use government-initiated immigration-document reverification against members. Now we're demanding that UC make stronger commitments not to collaborate with immigration enforcement.

Our table is set. Next we wage an escalating campaign, driven by the hundreds of union activists across the state who participate in our Member Action Teams. Each MAT leader checks in regularly with a group of co-workers to involve them in actions, and the MATs meet together regularly to plan and debrief recruitment efforts.

When we talk to co-workers about the racial justice demands, we're connecting them to a bigger picture—the new threats to our communities and national right-wing efforts to divide and destroy our labor movement.

We're also talking to other unions and other organizations resisting the Trump administration to share examples of what we're trying to do. It's difficult for any single union to win and defend racial justice provisions alone. To establish pattern standards on these issues will take many unions pursuing the same demands.

Luster Howard, a truck driver at the Lawrence Berkley National Laboratory, and Maricruz Manzanarez, a senior custodian at UC Berkeley, are members of the AFSCME 3299 bargaining team. Seth Patel is the local's lead negotiator.

UNIONS ALLYING WITH COMMUNITY RACIAL JUSTICE FIGHTS

For examples of unions allying with racial justice fights in their communities, see:

[Chicago Teachers and Black Lives Matter Activists Partner to Build a Bigger Movement](#)

[Future Fighters Go to the Mat for Black Lives](#) (Young members of Service Employees Healthcare Illinois-Indiana are working both inside the union and in their communities.)