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Black Lives Matter to Labor

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"For, as I have said, the police system of the South was originally designed to keep track of all Negroes, not simply of criminals; and when the Negroes were freed and the whole South was convinced of the impossibility of free Negro labor, the first and almost universal device was to use the courts as a means of reenslaving the blacks."

– W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*

The question of what to do with the black worker has represented one of this country's greatest dilemmas. The black worker has been systematically enslaved. As W.E.B. Du Bois recognized after slavery and reconstruction, the enslavement of black laborers led to the policing of not just slaves, but all black people living in America. Emancipation created a pool of free black labor. While freedom from enslavement obviously represented progress, emancipation signaled a racial contradiction in American capitalism that has persisted into the twenty-first century: the presence, or perception, of a racialized labor surplus engenders a compulsion by employers, white vigilantes, and state actors to inflict violence upon all black people. Emancipation, economic depression and recession, automation and other labor cost-saving advances, deindustrialization, and free market domestic and trade policies enabling global capitalism created the conditions for acts of violence inflicted on black bodies. This violence manifested itself in many forms since the late nineteenth century—lynching, incarceration, police harassment and brutality, economic and labor exploitation, structural unemployment, much of this leading to death.

Black labor leaders and many Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists are urging the rest of organized labor to understand these contradictions. One such effort is the Black Labor Collaborative's (BLC) recent publication of their report, "A Future for Workers: A Contribution from Black Labor." In advocating for a "transformed labor movement," black labor leaders from the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU), AFL-CIO, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the A. Phillip Randolph Institute, ground their call in the recognition that state violence is a labor issue. Their report underscores an important point: If organized labor hopes to regain power, and to realize economic justice, it must work to eliminate state violence and mass incarceration. It must work to dismantle, not just reform, the New Jim Crow. The appearance of BLC's report, however, not only illustrates how many unionists have seen BLM as a labor issue since Ferguson, it suggests that BLM and organized labor could gain much through collaboration, especially if both factions seek to attain racial and economic justice.

The BLC's report recalls how BLM and organized labor recognized the connections between race, class, gender, and sexuality, policing, and mass incarceration early on in the movement in Ferguson. As activist journalist, Trish Kahle reported, fast food workers liberated food from their employers

and delivered it to activists in Ferguson. "Workers from a Ferguson Chipotle location arrived with more than $1,000 worth of burritos and chips for protesters. After passing out food to the hungry demonstrators, they joined the march as a contingent and stayed for the evening, still wearing their work uniforms," Kahle recounted. I recognized organized labor's conspicuous presence at Ferguson October. Scores of marchers wore United Auto Workers (UAW), AFL-CIO, and CTBU t-shirts and hats. Protestors' moving rendition of the United Mine Workers' "Which Side Are You On" at the St. Louis Symphony went viral.

Labor and police brutality are connected in Ann Arbor, Michigan's anti-police brutality movement. Anti-police brutality activists from Ann Arbor to Ferguson (AA2F) have worked closely with the University of Michigan's (UM) graduate student union—the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO)—to hold the city's police department and political leaders accountable for last year's killing of Aura Rain Rosser. GEO served as a hub for racial justice organizing on campus. GEO activists like Robin Zheng, and former member, Jim McAsey, helped lay the foundation for the city's Black Lives Matter movement with their participation in UM's racial justice movement led by the Black Student Union (BSU). The following year, GEO functioned as a hub and facilitator for black lives matter organizing. Activists like Zheng and Denise Bailey, built on GEO's prior work by supplying financial and human resources to the struggle for justice for Rosser. In this case, GEO activists did not just act as labor organizers, they essentially embodied the multifaceted politics that all of organized labor needs. As many unionists and civil rights activists have proclaimed: labor rights are civil rights. The ability to live without fear of state violence is also a right all workers of color must enjoy.

Labor was present in AA2F organizing in other, inconspicuous, ways. A former member of Detroit's League of Revolutionary Black Workers is an indispensable figure in the movement. One of Ann Arbor to Ferguson held one of its largest marches on May Day where activists made explicit connections between capitalism and racist policing. Unionists in the local labor council have discussed ways to support police reforms in Ann Arbor as well.

On July 28, black unionists from the BLC provided a comprehensive vision for a labor politics in the era of Black Lives Matter. They released "A Future for Workers: A Contribution from Black Labor" with little fanfare. The report is important because it centers black workers in the fight to reinvigorate the labor movement. It is comprehensive, outlining several strategies to reinvigorate the labor movement in several areas of economic development, environment, wealth distribution, education, and criminal justice.

The report's analysis of the problem of black labor and unionism is radical in some aspects. Unlike Democratic politicians and pundits who often view the white male worker as the key to political success, the authors of the report seek to reposition—especially if one considers slave laborers as a crucial force in early American history—black workers at the fore of labor struggles. For the authors, racialized state violence, unemployment, and globalization, and unionists' failures to recognize these connections are tightly bound:

Black workers have been, for the working class as a whole, the canary in the mine. Black workers are the segment of the working class that are normally subject to the forward thrusts of employer

offenses. It is the segment of the working class that suffers most from unemployment and underemployment…It is the most obvious and brutalized victim of law enforcement lawlessness, not to mention other forms of lynchings. Yet they are not the only ones to suffer the juggernaut of capital.

What befalls the black worker inevitably confronts the bulk of the US working class, however, there is a failure in both academia as well as within the ranks of organized labor to recognize that the Black working class is…a component of the larger working class and not some marginal category. The problem is that when the US working class, and organized labor in particular, fails to respond to the toxicity of capital's eternal search for greater profits irrespective of consequences as it impacts Black workers, it inevitably is incapable of withstanding the assault when it expands ("A Future for Black Workers," 3).

The authors pair progressive solutions to their radical analysis of race, policing, labor, and capital. In the area of jobs and economic development, the report calls for the implementation of a taxation on Wall Street transactions, or the "Robin Hood Tax," federal support for worker cooperatives, and the creation of a full employment economy. The report calls for an end to fracking, dumping environmental waste in the global South, addressing environmental racism, and the transition away from a fossil fuel-based economy. They adopt the Urban League's "Marshall Plan" to rebuild cities. They also call upon banks to pay reparations for their role in racist lending practices that helped lead to the Great Recession in 2007-2008. The report also calls for free quality K-12 education, increased resources for public universities and Historically Black Colleges and Universities, as well as to "end the war against teachers" ("A Future for Black Workers," 8-18).

Many of the report's prescriptions for addressing racist policing and mass incarceration are congruent with BLM activists' more prominent reform proposals such as Campaign Zero's policy platform. Authors call for drug decriminalization, the creation of civilian review boards, and a reduction of incarceration for non-violent offenders. They also take the progressive approach to addressing policing: create job programs "for those who wish to work." Of course, as we have seen in BLM's confrontation with presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, jobs are important in preventing criminal activity, but they do not necessarily prevent citizen-police contact, which for African American workers like Sandra Bland, has proven deadly ("A Future for Black Workers," 14-16).

So, where should unionists go from here? The existence of stubborn police unions has emerged as a crucial question for unionists and for BLM strategists. Police unions are responsible for establishing the protections for officers who shoot and kill citizens. The question is vexing because it forces one to ask: Are police part or the working class? Are they agents of the state who sole concern is to defend private property? For some unionists, the latter appears to be the case. Police union leaders have led rebellions against city officials who seek to hold officers accountable or to pursue reform. UAW Local 2865 called for the AFL-CIO to expel the International Union of Police Association in July.

Unionists should recognize the particularity of black women's and black transpeoples' relationship with state violence. One of the drawbacks of "A Future for Workers" is that it fails to comment how state violence affects black women, as well as black LGBTQ people. The report recognizes how

sexism in the labor market negatively affects black women, but the authors reify the dominance of black male death in the context of state violence by citing the high probability that police would kill men. Black women and LGBTQ activists have illustrated that the key towards reform or liberation from the carceral state requires us to speak and act in accordance to the fact that all black lives matter, regardless of gender and sexuality.

Unionist participation in Black Lives Matter may draw more into the labor movement, but it will not solve the decline in labor density. Black Lives Matter is the perfect venue for the practice of social movement unionism. Labor locals, councils, and worker organizations should continue to serve as a resource hub for the movement against state violence. Of course, non-black labor activists should continue to act in the spirit of CBTU's charge that black labor is central to revitalizing the organized labor and BLM's desires for black folks to lead. It is possible, however, that unionist support could lead to an influx of BLM activist-workers. A symbiotic relationship between organized labor and the decentralized BLM could stimulate, or contribute to, a democratic revival among some of the rank and file within the larger labor movement. At times, we have created such a symbiotic relationship between the local anti-police brutality/racial justice movement and organized labor. Several graduate student organizers in the racial justice movement joined GEO in Ann Arbor. Several of us in the anti-police brutality movement supports undergraduates' recent efforts to organize a Fight for 15 campaign.

Black labor leaders are right to point out state violence and to call for greater police accountability, the decriminalization of drug use, and equitable sentencing. However, labor politics in the Black Lives Matter era could be more radical. Unionists should not only aid struggles against police brutality, they should fight for mass decarceration, or even prison abolition. Racist policing and mass incarceration hurts the labor movement by taking citizens, not just out of the labor pool, but out of society altogether. Organized labor cannot be strong as long as masses of black and brown people are incarcerated. Historically, African Americans are more likely to join labor unions. Decarceration would actually expand the "99%," thus providing a larger pool for organizing. Of course, there are no guarantees, but a society free of jail could help create a more democratic and economically just society.

Lastly, BLM organizers and unionists need to join in a full-scale rebuild of society. Stopping police from killing black people and decarceration are necessary first steps. We need to live to build a more equal and just society. Yet, it will become increasingly important for some BLM activists to start to not just think about what a world without police would look like, but, most importantly, what sorts of conditions need to be present for such a prospect to seem feasible. Such freedom dreaming, as Robin Kelley calls it, would force both BLM and unionists to think about how we may go about upending, changing, or reorienting particular structures and policies—federalism, private property rights, zoning laws, gentrification, free trade, immigration—that are necessary conditions for economic and racial justice. A combination of elements from BLC's "A Future for Workers," Mariame Kaba's "Summer Heat," Jesse A. Myerson's and Mychal Denzel Smith's outline of an BLM economic program, the Campaign Zero platform, as well as Angela Davis's work on prison abolition are good building blocks.

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