What roles can labor unions play in transforming our inner cities and promoting policies that might improve the overall condition of working people of color? What happens when union organizers extend their reach beyond the workplace to the needs of working-class communities? What has been the historical role of unions in the larger struggles of people of color, particularly black workers? These are crucial questions in an age when production has become less pivotal to working-class life. Increasingly, we've witnessed the export of whole production processes as corporations moved outside the country in order to take advantage of cheaper labor, relatively lower taxes, and a deregulated, frequently antiunion environment. And the labor force itself has changed. The old images of the American working class as white men residing in sooty industrial suburbs and smokestack districts are increasingly rare. The new service-based economy has produced a working class increasingly concentrated in the healthcare professions, educational institutions, office building maintenance, food processing, food services and various retail establishments. In the world of manufacturing, sweatshops are coming back, particularly in the garment industry and electronics assembling plants, and homework is growing. These unions are also more likely to be brown and female than they have been in the past. While white male membership dropped from 55.8% in 1986 to 49.7% in 1995, women now make up 37 percent of organized labor's membership—a higher percentage than at any time in the U.S. labor movement's history. Between 1976 and 1988, while the nation's overall labor force grew by 26%, the percent of black workers rose by 38%, Asian-American workers by 103%, and Latinos by 110%. (Indeed, the heavy concentration of native-born black people in public sector jobs partly explains why African Americans have such a high unionization rate.)

My intention in writing this paper is not to predict the future or make grand claims about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of labor/community strategies. Instead, I want to offer an historical accounting of the relationship between organized labor and urban communities of color. (Because of time limitations and the limits of my own knowledge, most of my examples draw on the experiences of black
workers, though I do discuss Latino and Asian-American workers when I am able.) An historical perspective is important because relationships and social movements are best understood within their own time and place; neither the labor movement, urban communities, nor the conditions in which they operate are fixed, nor can they be easily turned into a general theory. Any lessons we might garner from the past need to be examined within its own historical context and evaluated from the vantage point of our own time and place. For example, despite many efforts on the part of labor historians to generalize about unions and "race," all generalizations fail miserably. Representations of Black, Latino, and Asian workers run the gamut from perennial strikebreakers to "target workers" disinterested in unions to the nation's most militant trade unionists. Organized labor, on the other hand, has been portrayed as either incurably racist or the only hope for real emancipation. Of course, the truth (and the literature itself) is far more complicated and all of these generalizations suffer from a tendency to treat workers of color as passive victims manipulated by either middle class leadership or white labor bureaucrats. To get a handle on the history of labor unions and "racial discourse and policy" or the problems and prospects of labor/community strategies, we need to look beyond the official union histories and take into account self-organization-community institutions that might not look like unions but where working people have a voice and representation.

**BEYOND THE WORKPLACE: THOUGHTS ON CULTURE AND COMMUNITY**

While community might be the new buzz word among the current breed of "social movement" union organizers, throughout the 19th and the first part of the 20th centuries, the strength of organized labor resided in working-class communities. The workplace/community divide was not as clear cut as it is today. During the late 19th century, for example, the militant strikes that erupted along the railroads in 1877, in the mines of the Rocky Mountains and the steel mills in the East and mid-West among black washerwomen in the urban South, were essentially community struggles. It was never a simple matter of labor unions versus employers. The success of these strikes often depended on the fact that the local police, the families and even some of the merchants sided with the union, which meant that the employers had to bring in state troops and the private Pinkerton agents. Employers were forced to turn to the state and hired guns to suppress these strikes precisely because communities were mobilized. During the 1930s the success of the sit-down strikes in Akron and Detroit and the struggles of Latina and Asian-Pacific cannery workers in the West depended on community support; families and friends and sympathetic organizations brought
food and blankets, joined picket lines and got the word out, pooled money together to help struggling families survive the loss of a paycheck.5

The pivotal role of community support in labor struggles should not be surprising in light of the fact that working people live most of their lives in their neighborhoods, in their homes, in transit, in the public spaces of the city, in houses of worship, in bars, clubs, barbershops, hair salons, in various retail outlets, not to mention, welfare offices, courtrooms, even jail cells. They create and maintain families, build communities, engage in local and international politics, and construct a sense of fellowship that is sometimes life sustaining. Indeed, the presumption on the part of trade unionists that they are "organizing the unorganized"—a slogan which often applied directly to unskilled workers of color—ignores the fact that these workers often came from highly organized communities. Grassroots institutions such as mutual benefit associations, fraternal organizations, and religious groups not only helped families with basic survival needs, but created and sustained bonds of fellowship, mutual support networks, and a collectivist ethos that ultimately informed working-class political struggle. Fraternal and mutual benefit societies, in particular, provided funds and other resources to members in need and to the poor generally, including death benefits (mainly to cover burial costs) and assistance for families whose members became seriously ill or lost their job.

The social links created through these organizations occasionally translated into community and labor struggles. In Atlanta, for example, benevolent and secret societies among black women constituted the organizational structures through which washerwomen waged a city-wide strike in 1881. Organized under the auspices of the "Washing Society," a secret protective association that operated much like a mutual benefit society, the strikers not only demonstrated incredible solidarity (in some cases prompting other domestic workers in the city to demand higher wages) but raised money to pay fines and post bail when strikers were arrested. In addition to relying on their own treasury, they received donations from churches and fraternal orders with which many of the strikers were also affiliated. In West Virginia, where black membership in fraternal orders reached nearly 33,000 in 1922, the black rank-and-file entered the United Mine Workers with considerable organizational experience. The bonds of fellowship developed in these fraternal orders played an important role in consolidating black union support, even if some of orders' middle-class leadership opposed unionization.
Black church members also helped build Southern labor unions, especially during the era of industrial unionism in the 1930's and 1940's, when the Congress of Industrial Organization sought to organize industries that employed large numbers of African-Americans. Unions such as the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers (FTA), the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), and the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, often held meetings in black churches and actively recruited sympathetic black ministers to their cause. And when black working people entered the house of labor, they brought the spirit, culture, and rituals of the church with them. Southern CIO organizer Lucy Randolph Mason had vivid memories of how black workers turned union gatherings into revival meetings: “Those meetings were deeply religious. A colored member would pray and lead in singing and dismiss the gathering with a blessing. In one group there was an elderly Negro who ‘lined out’ the Lord's prayer verse by verse while others repeated the words after him. They were praying for more of the Kingdom of God on earth.”

Scholars, like trade union organizers, must always pay attention to culture, community institutions, as well as the daily concerns and desires of working people. These issues have as much of an impact on the workplace as on community organizing. One of the weaknesses of traditional “bread and butter” unionism is that it defines so-called “bread and butter” issues too narrowly and imagines that the universal desire of all workers is higher wages. For example, scholarship on black female tobacco workers demonstrates the ways in which gender shapes workplace experiences and demands. First of all, work is not only segmented by race but by gender. Not only were the dirty and difficult tasks of sorting, stemming, and rehandling tobacco relegated to black women, but the spaces in which they worked were unbearably hot dry, dark, and poorly ventilated. The coughing and wheezing, the tragically common cases of workers succumbing to tuberculosis, the endless speculation as to the cause of miscarriages among co-workers, were constant reminders that these black women risked their lives for a paycheck. And if that was not enough, foremen treated them as perpetual motion machines as well as sexual objects. Thus, in addition to race, gender bonds were reinforced by the common experience of sexual harassment. Recalled one Reynolds worker, “I've seen [foremen] just walk up and pat women on their fannies and they'd better not say anything.” Women, unlike their male co-workers, had to devise a whole range of strategies to resist or mitigate the daily physical and verbal abuse of their bodies. Yet, in the eyes of most male union leaders,
these sorts of battles were private affairs that had no place among "important" collective bargaining issues. Unfortunately, most labor historians have accepted this view, unable to see resistance to sexual harassment as a primary struggle to transform everyday conditions at the workplace." Out of the common social space and experience of racism and sexual exploitation, black female tobacco workers constructed "networks of solidarity." They referred to each other as "sisters," shared the same neighborhoods and institutions, attended the same churches, and displayed a deep sense of community by collecting money for co-workers during sickness and death and by celebrating each other's birthdays. These "networks of solidarity" were indispensable for organizing tobacco plants in Winston-Salem and elsewhere. 12

In rethinking workplace struggles and women's work cultures, we must be careful not to overemphasize the distinct character of home and work. We can learn a lot about the limitations of "separate spheres" and the interdependence of home and work from Chicana feminist historians such as Vicki Ruiz, Clementina Duron, Camille Guerin-Gonzales and Patricia Zavella. Resisting the arbitrary division between the "domestic sphere" and the workplace, they discuss how family, community, and housing shaped the workplace and vice versa is critical for understanding the roots of Mexican-American labor militancy as well as its silences. That a community was even in place, and that home life, housing, and the quality of living were even issues in agricultural workers' struggles, powerfully challenge the commonly accepted idea that Mexican-American workers before WWII were "birds of passage." 13 Recent studies of paid homework remind us that working women's homes were often extensions of the factory (and in today's environment we will probably see a further expansion of homework). For African-American women, in particular, as some scholars have shown, the decision to do piece work or take in laundry grew out of a struggle for greater control over the labor process, a conscious effort to avoid workplace environments that were regarded as degrading or dangerous. Indeed, for many women homework was a way to avoid the indignities of household service, for as the experience of black tobacco workers suggest, much workplace resistance centered around issues of dignity, respect, and autonomy. Sexual harassment was part of the job. "It was always attempts made on black women from white men," one domestic worker remembers. "Sometimes he had a knack for patting you on the back, not on your back but on your behind, and telling you that you was a nice-looking black gal and this type of thing. And I resented that." 14

Finally, as Eileen Boris points out, homework also catered to "the patriarchal desires of men to care for
their women even when they barely could meet economic needs of their families or from women's own desires to care for their children under circumstances that demanded that they contribute to the family economy." 15

LABOR AND THE "WHITE" PROBLEM

While black, Latino and Asian American working people devised workplace and community strategies to protect themselves and their families, before the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1935, very few could be found in labor unions. Part of their reluctance to support trade unions had to do with organized labor's rather mixed record on racial equality. That organized labor has a history of hostility toward workers of color—particularly black workers—should not be surprising: after all, the American labor movement was born in an economy built in part on plantation slavery. As the work of W.E.B. DuBois, Dave Roediger, Alexander Saxton, Ted Allen, Noel Ignatiev, George Lipsitz, Ruth Frankenberg, Matthew Frye Jacobson, Michael Goldfield, Eric Lott, David Wellman and others demonstrate, the presence of African slaves, especially in the Age of Revolution, meant that freedom and free labor would become inextricably tied to being white and male. It also enabled the new American (white) working class to displace anxieties within the white population onto black people. This scholarship is especially important, for it maps the history of how European workers came to see themselves as white and the political and cultural manifestations of an (antebellum) white working-class racial identity. As a consequence, "whiteness" became both a source of solidarity holding together many different immigrants and settlers and a powerful fetter to an effective working-class challenge to capitalism. 16 In the South during Reconstruction, a misguided white majority sided with the wrong class and rejected the black workers and sharecroppers who proposed a democratic South with massive land redistribution. Despite the fact that the black freedom struggle, in alliance with the radical wing of the Republican Party, enfranchised poor whites who didn't have the right to vote before the 15th Amendment, the vast majority of exploited white labor still chose color over class. In California, according to Alexander Saxton, it was precisely anti-Chinese sentiment that galvanized the multi-ethnic "white" working class and forged a dynamic union movement on the West Coast during the late 19th century. 17 Likewise, as Neil Foley points out in his recent book The White Scourge, during the early 20th century Mexicans found limited acceptance in the world of whiteness partly because their radical activities were bound up with the Mexican Revolution. At
the same time, poor whites claims on "whiteness" were amazingly tenuous: white tenants came to be regarded as less than-civilized and thus one step away from being a racialized Other. The only way to secure white privilege was by undermining the economic and political status of Mexican and black farmers and workers, which obviously had a detriment on rural organizing efforts. 18

The failure to build a strong multiracial labor movement, in other words, had more to do with white racism than reluctance or distrust on the part of workers of color. Ironically, one could argue that the (white) labor movement in this period was partly forged because of racism, which in the long run substantially weakened the movement while providing a basis for solidarity. Throughout this period we witness tremendous nativism and anti-immigration sentiment rooted in white workers’ fears of competition from Chinese immigrants for jobs. Labor organizations, including the American Federation of Labor under Samuel Gompers' leadership, actively lobbied for extending the Chinese Exclusion Act, originally passed in 1882, when it came up for congressional renewal in 1892.19 In general, however, sentiment for immigration restriction was at least as widespread among employers as in labor unions in these years. Though industrialists sought a cheap and steady labor supply, their desires were more than counterbalanced by their belief that immigrants were a source of labor strife, violence, and radicalism.

In the face of racism, nativism, and an increase in lynching and various terrorist activities directed at African Americans, Chinese, and Mexican workers in the Southwest, opportunities for interracial labor organizing were few and far between. Workers of color tended to participate in race and ethnic based institutions, often turning to self-help strategies to survive and build community. While most labor unions limited their membership to whites only, there were a few exceptions. The Knights of Labor, founded in 1869, vowed not to discriminate on the basis of race (though they did exclude Chinese workers). At its height in 1886, it claimed nearly one million members, of which 60,000 were black. Black members of the Knights, particularly in the South, focused more of their energies on community building and economic independence than on improving workplace conditions. For example, they took the lead in establishing cooperative stores and cooperative cotton gins, and some chapters of the Knights (particularly in Richmond) organized massive resistance to segregation and disfranchisement. 20

The American Federation of Labor, founded in 1881 under the leadership of Samuel Gompers, initially planned to organize industrial workers. Knowing that any serious effort to organize unskilled and
semi-skilled labor depended on bringing in black and immigrant workers, the AFL initially refused to charter discriminatory locals. However, by 1893 the AFL backtracked on the "race" question, choosing to charter racist locals and focus its energies on skilled craft unions which tended to be primarily if not exclusively white. Indeed, the AFL’s brand of "bread and butter" unionism not only discriminated against black workers but narrowed its field of vision to workplace concerns to the detriment of community struggles. The AFL’s tolerance for whites-only locals and segregated unions further pushed black, Latino, and Asian workers out of the house of labor and into the role as strike breakers and “scabs”.21 This position (one many workers of color resisted) contributed to the increased scapegoating of black and brown laborers, who were often represented in the mainstream labor press as inherently anti-labor. Meanwhile, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), founded in 1905, was not buying the idea that unskilled, non-white workers were unorganizable. On the contrary, they emerged out of the radical Western Federation of Miners, whose members included Native American and Mexican mine workers, to challenge the increasingly conservative leadership of Samuel L. Gompers and the AFL. The "Wobblies," as they were called, sought to organize the lowly worker of every kind and location, into a movement which set out to build a new, egalitarian society within the shell of the old one. Despite the attraction the Wobblies held for African-Americans and immigrants, the IWW had little luck organizing African Americans, and when they succeeded their efforts were concentrated in Southern agriculture, primarily the lumber and sugar cane industry, and along the docks of Philadelphia.22 The IWW affiliated Marine Transport Workers Union was a predominantly black union led by one of the most talented African-American labor leaders of the 20th century, Benjamin Fletcher. Although 5,000 members of the 8,700 member union were black, it is significant that the bulk of his white support came from Jewish and Polish workers. Nevertheless, by 1923 Fletcher's experience with racist white workers overwhelmed his enthusiasm for "One Big Union.” Even his own beloved Wobblies never paid special attention to the specific situation of African-Americans and they sought, too simply, to rise above the racism and ethnocentricity of the working class and its capitalist masters. To solve the class question, they argued, was to solve the race question. They also failed to recognize that the most downtrodden European immigrants had opportunities, over generations if not in their own lives, to become "white”-opportunities neither African-Americans, Asians, and in some cases, Latinos did not enjoy. Anti-Semitism certainly didn’t die, but assimilated Jews, Italians and Slavs had a
much better chance than assimilated Negroes. Indeed, over a decade before DuBois published his magnum opus, Black Reconstruction Fletcher clearly understood the tragedy of white identity politics: “Organized labor, for the most part be it radical or conservative, thinks and acts, in the terms of the White Race.”

Black workers, then, were also compelled to think in terms of "the race," but that did not mean supporting the status quo. Not did defending "the race" necessarily mean excluding others or organizing exclusively around black causes, for as Benjamin Fletcher and many others like him demonstrated, building interracial movements to protect working-class interests is a way of defending black people from racism and class exploitation. Moreover, the concern about protecting black interests reflected the dialectic of work and community. While scholars have established in no uncertain terms the degree to which occupations and, in some cases, work spaces were segregated by race, only recently has scholarship begun to move beyond staid discussions of labor market segmentation and racial (and more recently, gender) inequality to an analysis of what these distinctions at work and home mean for black (not to mention, Latino, Asian-American, Native American) working-class politics and for collective action.

All-black trade unions, like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, constitute the most obvious examples of labor organizing in defense of "the race." The BSCP, under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph, had a presence on the railways as well as in black communities. BSCP organizers like Randolph, Milton P. Webster, E.D. Nixon, to name a few, emerged as black community leaders well beyond their union activities. Members of the union earned a level of respect within black communities that enabled them to claim middle class status and respectability. And the formation of a strong and active women's auxiliary meant that the political and social activities of the Brotherhood would extend far beyond the workplace. Melinda Chatuvert's important new book, Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters portrays a community-oriented union that not only maintained a powerful political presence in the black world but served as a platform for African American women's struggles for equality and democracy for themselves and their communities. Moreover, she demonstrates that the success of the union depended on community support, and that was obtained primarily through the organizing work of women. On the other hand, the BSCP was never an exclusionary organization. They were formed as a result of the Jim Crow policies of both the employers (who only hired black workers as sleeping car porters) and the railway unions. In fact, Randolph, a leading Socialist and magazine editor
when he took over as head of the BSCP, spent a good deal of his life lobbying the AFL to recognize the union. 26

A lesser known and more local example of independent black trade unionism can be found in Earl Lewis's In Their Own Interests: Race, Class and Power in Twentieth Century Norfolk. During World War I, the all-black Transport Workers Association of Norfolk began organizing African-American waterfront workers irrespective of skill. Soon thereafter, its leaders turned their attention to the ambitious task of organizing all black workers, most notably cigar stemmers, oyster shuckers, and domestics. The TWA's Wobbly sensibility and racial politics combined to create One Big Negro Union. What is important about the Norfolk story is the startling success of the TWA's efforts, particularly among workers that had been dismissed as unorganizable. Lewis is not satisfied with simplistic explanations like the power of charismatic leadership or the primacy of race over class to account for the mass support for the TWA; rather, he makes it quite clear that the labor process, work spaces, intra-class power relations, communities and neighborhoods--indeed, class struggle itself--are all racialized. The result, therefore, is a "racialized" class consciousness shaped by the social locations of work and home. Lewis writes,

In the world in which these workers lived nearly everyone was black, except for a supervisor or employer. Even white workers who may have shared a similar class position enjoyed a superior social position because of their race. Thus, although it appears that some black workers manifested a semblance of worker consciousness, that consciousness was so imbedded in the perspective of race that neither blacks nor whites saw themselves as equal partners in the same labor movement. 27

This concept of a "racialized class consciousness" need not be limited to unions like the TWA. It also shaped black workers' relations with interracial trade unions. Contrary to popular belief, black workers did not always resist segregated union locals; in some instances African-American workers preferred segregated locals --as long as they maintained control over their own finances and played a leading role in the larger decision-making process. To cite one example, black members of the Brotherhood of Timber Workers in Louisiana, an IWW affiliate, found the idea of separate locals quite acceptable. However, at its 1912 convention black delegates complained that they could not "suppress a feeling of taxation without representation" since their dues were in the control of whites, and demanded a coloured executive board, elected by black union members and designed to work in harmony with its white counterpart.’ “ 28

THE PROMISE OF INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM
Invariably, Jim Crow locals were primarily products of white racism, not black demands for self-determination. With the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organization in 1935, however, it appeared that the days of segregated trade unionism were numbered. An outgrowth of the Committee of Industrial Organizations within the AF of L, it was spurred on by the National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act) which allowed workers to vote for unions (against company unions), made closed shops legal, and outlawed many unfair practices by employers. Because the CIO was conceived of as a conglomeration of industrial unions and its leader, John L. Lewis, hired a fairly large number of labor militants who had a history in left-wing movements, it vigilantly opposed Jim Crow locals and segregationist policies—at least on the national level. Besides, an industrial union could not afford to ignore workers of color: in the steel industry alone there were 85,000 black workers across the country. The CIO made a tremendous contribution to the unionization of African Americans: The number of organized black workers increased from 150,000 in 1935 to 1.25 million by the end of World War II. The CIO quickly developed ties with black communities beyond their immediate dues paying members. Their willingness to fight for black civil and voting rights earned the CIO support from black leadership, and the CIO itself (like the Communist Party) produced a new generation of black leaders that pushed traditional black reform organizations to a more working-class orientation. 29

Although it would be a stretch to characterize the CIO of the 1930s as a “community” organization, it did have a visible presence in black communities, especially in the urban South. CIO locals held meetings in black churches and lodges and local leaders organized voter registration campaigns and established workshops to inform union members of their legal and constitutional rights. In Winston-Salem, North Carolina, for example, Local 22 of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers was largely responsible for electing that city's first black councilman in 1947, the Reverend Kenneth Williams. 30 But FTA was not entirely representative of the CIO as a whole. In fact, FTA was one of the "left-led" unions; its primary organizers were Communists or radicals close to the Communist Party. Other left-led unions, such as the International Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union, contributed directly to the political strength of communities of color. In the Southwest, Mine Mill defended the rights of Mexican mine workers and led one of the most successful strikes of the postwar period—the infamous "Salt of the Earth" strike, about which blacklisted director Herbert Biberman made his classic film of the same title. The New
Mexico miners succeeded precisely because of the union's strong ties with the community. Entire families picketed and the battle lines seemed to be drawn everywhere, especially in the company-owned homes and neighborhoods. In Bessemer, Alabama, the most prominent civil rights activist was Mine Mill organizer Asbury Howard. Howard not only served as president of the Progressive Voters League and vice-president of the Bessemer NAACP, but he was active in the Progressive Party and even supported the Communist-led Civil Rights Congress during the early 1950s.31

The CIO's overall record was a bit more mixed. Initially the CIO did very little to challenge discriminatory hiring practices or the unspoken occupational ceilings placed on black workers, and in the South especially, CIO bureaucrats were reluctant to put African Americans forward in leadership positions (again, the left-led unions were exceptional in this regard). And like other union efforts in the past, the CIO did not venture into occupational areas where African Americans were over-represented, i.e., domestic service and agriculture. (It did inherit some agricultural unions such as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the Share Croppers Union, but it limited its membership to wage laborers only and invested very few resources into these unions. Hence the CIO rural efforts never got off the ground.) Furthermore, during World War II the CIO agreed to a no-strike pledge that paralyzed some of the labor battles that had not been resolved with the first campaigns of the late 1930s. And in the midst of the Cold War, as Congress passed a slate of anti-labor legislation, the CIO expelled all eleven left-led unions--the unions with the best record on anti-racism, and defending the civil and legal rights of workers of color. The expulsions weakened the labor movement substantially--CIO membership dropped from 5.2 million during war to 3.7 million in 1950 after the purges. (Local 22 of FTA in Winston Salem faced a wide-scale anticommunist attack and was contested in a National Labor Relations Board Election in 1949 by a new, conservative CIO union. They lost by only 60 votes, but it did destroy Local 22's bargaining agreement and insured that R.J. Reynolds workers would remain unorganized. The local continued to exist, however, and its leader--Miranda Smith--was appointed Southern Regional Director of FTA, making her the highest ranking black woman on the labor movement up to that point). 32

The CIO also abandoned its massive Southern campaign, better known as Operation Dixie. Had Operation Dixie succeeded, according to Michael Goldfield, it would have changed the entire character of Southern politics. A strong labor alliance would have overthrown the Dixiecrats, registered black voters in
greater numbers, and improved the condition of most workers. The failure of Operation Dixie rendered the Southern labor movement weak and divided, leaving the doors open for white supremacist rule throughout the South, including the labor movement. In fact, its possible that a strong, progressive Southern labor movement would have altered the nature of the Civil Rights movement whose Southern character was largely black middle- and working-class.\footnote{33}

Despite the witch hunt atmosphere and the CIO's back pedaling on civil rights (which seemed more evident after it merged with the AFL in 1956), black labor leaders were nevertheless able to form the National Negro Labor Council in 1951. The purpose of the NNLC was to pressure organized labor and employers to respond to the needs of black workers. It sought to improve working conditions and desegregate jobs that had been historically "whites only." More significantly, the NNLC produced a body of leaders who would go on to play critical roles on black politics, particularly at the local level. Its director Ernest Thompson emerged as a major political figure in East Orange, New Jersey; William R. Hood of Local 600 UAW was highly respected in the black communities of Detroit as was the Council's executive secretary, Coleman Young. Young, of course, went on to occupy the mayor's office for almost two decades. The NNLC was also unusual for the large number of women in its ranks; approximately one-third of its members were women during the early 1950s and some, like Octavia Hawkins of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and Vickie Garvin of the United Office and Professional Workers of America (UOPWA)-CIO, rose to leadership positions both within the NNLC and in black community organizations in general. Garvin, who served as executive secretary of the NNLC's New York chapter, is an excellent example of the kind of progressive community leaders the labor movement produced. Raised in a black working class family in New York, Garvin spent her summers working in the garment industry to supplement her family's income. As early as High School, she became active in Black protest politics, supporting efforts by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. to obtain better paying jobs for African Americans in Harlem and creating Black history clubs dedicated to building library resources. After earning her B.A. in political science from Hunter College and M.A. in Economics from Smith College, she spent the war years working for the National War Labor Board and continued on as an organizer for the and national research director and co-chair of the Fair Employment Practices Committee. During the postwar purges of the Left in the CIO, Garvin was a strong voice of protest and a sharp critic of the CIO's failure to organize in the
South. In the 1950s Garvin established close ties to Malcolm X, helped him arrange part of his tour of Africa in 1959, and eventually joined other black expatriates in Ghana (and later relocated to China for several years).

I describe Garvin's life and work at length precisely to illustrate the point that black activists rarely made sharp distinctions between labor organizing and community work. This is why when the House Un-American Activities Committee and the Subversive Activities Control Board finally succeeded in destroying the NNLC, these black activists continued to thrive politically because they established a strong base in black community institutions. No matter what we might think of the AFL-CIO's record in the realm of civil rights and anti-racism, black (and I presume Latino and Asian-American) labor leaders persisted in fighting on several fronts at once; they not only held prominent positions in civil rights organizations but, in many instances, pioneered workplace and community struggles that has contributed to improving the lives of all workers, irrespective of race.

RETHINKING LABOR/COMMUNITY STRATEGIES: FROM REVOLUTIONARY UNIONISM TO SOCIAL UNIONISM

In the final section of this paper, I want to briefly examine a few more contemporary case studies that might illuminate the problems and prospects of community-based unionism for working people of color. One of the most important and still under-studied urban labor movement is the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), which spawned the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. The roots of DRUM are in Detroit's black activist community as well as on the shop floors of the auto industry. Several leading figures in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit, most notably Luke Tripp, General Baker, Charles (Mao) Johnson and, John Watson had been Wayne State University student activists identified with radical black nationalist and civil rights organizations. Watson, for example, had worked with a number of organizations, including the Freedom Now Party (an all-Black political party that endorsed socialist Clifton DeBerry for president in 1964), SNCC, and the Negro Action Committee. Upon his return from Cuba, General Baker moved even deeper into Detroit's labor and left circles, taking a job as a production worker at the Chrysler Dodge Main plant and taking classes on Marx's Capital with Marty
Glaberman, a veteran radical of the Johnson-Forest tendency (a breakaway from the Socialist Workers Party led by C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya that included James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs). The Inner City Voice (IVJ), which Watson began editing after the Detroit riots in 1967, was conceived as a revolutionary publication that could build links between Black radicals, particularly students and labor activists, with the broader Black community.

Having studied the works of Lenin, and to a lesser degree Stalin and Mao, the militants who started ICV regarded the newspaper as "the focus of a permanent organization [that] could provide a bridge between the peaks of activity." And they tried to live up to this injunction: in 1968 Baker organized a discussion group consisting largely of Dodge Main workers at the ICV's office. Not long afterward—the day after May Day, 1968, to be exact—4,000 workers at the Dodge Main plant walked out in a wildcat strike, the first in that factory in fourteen years and the first organized and led entirely by Black workers. From there this core of radical workers around Baker and the ICV group gave birth to DRUM—the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement.

DRUM's specific demands—safer workplaces, lower production demands, an end to racist hiring practices—echoed past grievances. DRUM's leaders understood these isolated shop floor conflicts as aspects of the larger fight against capitalism. Of course they wanted to win better working conditions and wages for Black workers, but their ultimate goal was freedom for all workers. Their analysis of the role of racism, which they saw as coming both from the company and fellow workers, also influenced their organizational strategy. DRUM members knew that racism limited the ability of workers to unite, and that white workers were hurt by this as well as Black workers. But they also argued that white workers benefited from racism in the form of higher wages, cleaner and safer jobs and greater union representation.

DRUM not only had links to Detroit's black community, but it had particularly strong ties to Black student radicals at Wayne State University, some of whom actually worked in the plants. During the wildcats at the Dodge Main and Eldon Avenue plants, students walked the picket line after court injunctions prevented the striking workers from coming near the plant gates. DRUM supporters also took over the South End, the daily student newspaper at Wayne, and John Watson became its editor during the 1968-69 school year. It became a tool for drawing students into DRUM and for communicating with the Black working class in Detroit. Most copies were distributed not on campus but free at plant gates and in
parking lots. Claiming on its masthead to be “The Voice of Revolution” the *South End* became Detroit's Black daily paper at a moment when serving the Black community was understood by many people as compatible with being the voice of revolution.”

The League makes an interesting case study for our purposes precisely because its members were divided over whether to adopt a workplace or community-based strategy. One outgrowth of their community-based approach was the Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC) in the Spring of 1969, led largely by former SNCC activist James Forman. Out of BEDC came Forman's proposal for a Black Manifesto, which demanded, among other things, $500,000,000 in reparations from white churches to be used to purchase land in the South, fund Black publishing companies, a research skills center, and Black Southern university, and a National Black Labor Strike fund. The work in BEDC led the League leadership, of which Forman was now a part, away from its local emphasis. Their efforts led to the founding of the Black Workers Congress in 1970. The BWC was conceived more or less as a coalition of Black radical labor activists, and it attracted a number of Marxist and left nationalist movements. Eventually the BWC under Forman became a Marxist-Leninist organization calling for workers' control over the economy and the state to be brought about through cooperatives, united front groups, neighborhood centers, student organizations, and ultimately a revolutionary party.

While Forman made various revolutionary pronouncements, the League's local base began to disintegrate. Several League activists, including Chuck Wooten and General Baker, had been fired and all of the DRUMs were barely functional by 1972. The General Policy Statement of the League, which based everything on the need for vibrant "DRUM type" organizations seemed to have fallen by the wayside. In short, the League essentially abandoned its shop floor emphasis for a revolutionary style politics that seemed increasingly alienated from Detroit's black community. The strength of the DRUM movement was its ability to keep both in play, to build links between students, workers on the shop floor, and the black working class communities where most students and workers lived. Reflecting on the collapse of the League, Ken Cockrel observed, "We had to develop a concept of what to do when workers are fired for doing organizational activity, and you are not in a position to feed them, and you are not in a position to force management to take them back, and you are not in a position to relate concretely to any of their needs
If you make no response you are in a position of having led workers out of the plant on the basis of an anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist line and having the man respond and you can’t do anything.”

Perhaps the greatest tragedy for the League was the failure of white workers to support the RUMs. Of course, had the UAW used its resources to support League demands rather than lining up with the auto companies to isolate and destroy them, the outcome would have probably been different. Certainly the sea-change in the current national leadership of the AFL-CIO as well as the changing face of labor has created an environment in which many of DRUM's core demands would fit well with organized labor's current agenda. The 1995 victory of John Sweeney (president), Richard Trumka (secretary/treasurer), and Linda Chavez-Thompson (executive vice-president)--the triumvirate that defeated the established old guard of Tom Donahue, heir apparent to Lane Kirkland and George Meany--reflected a new mood in the labor movement that recognizes the critical importance of women and workers of color as well as the need for community based strategies. 36

Yet, as dramatic as these changes in national leadership might appear, they reflect several decades of rank-and-file efforts on the part of workers of color to re-orient unions toward issues of social justice, racism, sexism, and cultural difference within their ranks-decades I barely touched on throughout this paper. Indeed, one of the most significant labor-based social justice movements emerged out of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the union headed by John J. Sweeney before he took over the leadership of the AFL-CIO. Launched in 1985, "Justice for Janitors” sought to build a mass movement to promote union recognition and to address the needs of a workforce made up primarily of people of color, mainly immigrants. As Sweeney explained, "The strategy of Justice for Janitors was to build a mass movement. . . . The campaigns addressed the special needs of an immigrant workforce, largely from Latin America. In many cities, the janitors’ cause became a civil rights movement--and a cultural crusade.”37

From its inception, Justice for Janitors has been deeply committed to antiracism and mass mobilization through community-based organizing and civil disobedience. Heirs of the sit-down strikers of the 1930s and the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, they have waged militant, highly visible campaigns in major cities throughout the country.38 In Los Angeles, for example, Justice for Janitors is largely responsible for the dramatic increase in unionized custodial employees, particularly among workers
contracted out by big firms to clean high-rise buildings. The percentage of janitors belonging to unions rose from 10% of the workforce in 1987 to 90% in 1995.39

Justice for Janitors succeeded precisely because it was able to establish links to community leaders, to forge an alliance with black and Latino organizations, churches, and progressive activists from all over the city. They built a powerful mass movement that went beyond the downtown luxury office buildings and the SEIU Local 399 headquarters into the streets and boardrooms. Their challenge is all the more remarkable when we consider the fact that Proposition 187, a California initiative denying basic rights to immigrants, had only recently been passed. After all, the SOU in Los Angeles was primarily a union of immigrant workers.40

In Washington D.C., Justice for Janitors led the struggle of Local 82 of the SEIU in their fight against U.S. Service Industries--a private janitorial company that used non-union labor to clean downtown office buildings. But because they conceived of themselves as a social movement, they did not stop with the protection of union jobs. In March of 1995, Justice for Janitors organized several demonstrations in the district that led to over 200 arrests. Blocking traffic and engaging in other forms of civil disobedience, the protesters demanded an end to tax breaks to real estate developers as well as cut backs in social programs for the poor. As union spokesperson Manny Pastreich put it, "This isn't just about 5,000 janitors; it's about issues that concern all D.C. residents--what's happening to their schools, their streets, their neighborhoods."

In the end, their challenge to the city and to USSI paid off. In December of 1995, the National Labor Relations Board concluded that USSI had "a history of pervasive illegal conduct by threatening, interrogating, and firing employees they deemed unacceptable, especially those committed to union organizing. African American workers, in particular, had suffered most from the wave of firings, in part because USSI, like other employers, believed immigrant workers were more malleable and less committed to unionization because of their tenuous status as residents.42 The NLRB's decision against USSI, therefore, was a substantial victory for Local 82 of the SEIU. It meant that USSI could no longer discriminate against the union and it generated at least a modicum of recognition for Justice for Janitors.

In a highly decentralized, runaway shop environment like that which exists in the garment industry, community-based organizing is often the only way to reach the majority of workers. In Los Angeles, where Latino and Asian-American garment workers are spread across many small plants and shops, organizing
shop by shop would prove costly and time consuming. The Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) adopted a community-based strategy that has been quite successful. In the predominantly Latino community near MacArthur Party (downtown Los Angeles), UNITE runs a “justice center” that provides language and citizenship classes, as well as a support network to help workers resolve workplace disputes. By maintaining a major presence in these neighborhoods, providing services and working with neighborhood groups, organizers not only helped build the union but gain a better understanding of the community, its culture, and its leadership base.

Finally, in Greensboro, North Carolina, UNITE’s ability to build a strong base in the black community ensured the success of its three-year struggle against K-Mart, which finally ended in victory during the summer of 1996. Essentially, UNITE Local 2603 launched a campaign to win a union contract and protest racial inequities in wages: K-Mart workers at the nearly all-black facility were making a mere $4.60. In addition to filing a complaint with the EEOC, UNITE enlisted all the key local black community leaders and were able to get over 10,000 signatures on a petition to K-Mart’s chairman demanding an end to discrimination. As a result of intensive workplace and community-based organizing, K-Mart signed a contract with the union that included, among other things, "a grievance procedure protecting workers against unjust discipline and terminations, seniority rights in job bidding, a limit to the number of temporaries, two additional holidays" and wage increases of 50 cents and hour for the first year and 75 cents for the subsequent years thereafter.

The main force behind the boycott, besides the union, was a coalition of Greensboro black ministers called "The Pulpit Forum" led by the Reverend William Wright. In addition to building communication networks through their congregations and speaking openly on behalf of the K-Mart workers, The Pulpit Forum organized mass civil disobedience campaigns in which several ministers were arrested. Wright, like his fellow workers in The Pulpit Forum, understood the campaign in terms of the Civil Rights movement—he characterized it as a crusade for justice with far reaching implications. "Kmart does not realize," he pointed out, "that what starts in Greensboro has a way of reaching the conscience of our nation." Pulpit Forum leader Rev. Nelson Johnson shared Williams' view and went further, recognizing UNITE’s struggle as the beginnings of a movement that could dismantle corporate power over the working class. A veteran activist with a long radical history in North Carolina, Johnson began in the Civil Rights
movement and quickly moved to the left, becoming one of the founders of the African Liberation Support Committee in 1972 and subsequently a leader of the Workers Viewpoint Organization (later called the Communist Workers Party). In fact, sixteen years before UNITE celebrated its victory over K-Mart, Johnson almost died on the same Greensboro streets when Klansmen and Nazis opened fire on a WVO-led anti-Klan demonstration. 45

Rather than simply appeal to black workers as "workers," UNITE appealed to the whole black community and tapped a deep tradition of resistance to racism and injustice. Mobilizing the entire black community was the key to their victory. Indeed, two years before the final contract with K-Mart, the Greensboro City Council passed a resolution requiring that all future employers moving into the city limits pay a minimum starting salary of $12.50 per hour before receiving any city tax incentives. It was a bold move, to be sure. Yet it represents a glimmer of what could happen when an entire community takes a stand against the rapaciousness of multinational corporations and racial inequality.46

SOME CONCLUSIONS

As more and more plants downsize or shut down altogether, traditional workplace activism (in some instances at least) has begun to lose its efficacy. Of course, union organizing is still crucial, but for the majority of non-union workers--many of whom must work part-time or don't have jobs--alternative strategies are needed. Developing new approaches to working-class activism, particularly as it relates to urban communities of color, is especially important since conservative social policies have begun to effectively erode what's left of civil society, government safety nets, and essential public services to the urban poor and working class. Moreover, immigration and the transformation of work from manufacturing to service, from decent paying full-time jobs to low wage part-time and temporary jobs, has led to a dramatic shift in the character and complexion of the working class.

What are the implications for community-based labor organizing? On the one hand, as firms leave core urban communities employment, when it is available, tends to be outside of working-class neighborhoods. The ties that have bound together employers and employees within single communities have been severed (though they've always been rather tenuous), leaving many inner city communities without viable economies and in need to decent mass transportation. On the surface, then, it might appear
that workplace organizing should not be coupled with community organizing just given the growing distance between these two spaces. Yet, the historical evidence suggests the opposite. First, working people of color, whether they are immigrants or native-born, have always linked community struggles with labor organizing, and the labor movement has long tapped into community-based organizations to build its own membership. In most cases, organizing campaigns succeeded precisely because they were able to secure massive community support. Today, with corporations more mobile than ever and the workforce more flexible than ever, workplace strategies alone will fail dismally. Communities not only serve as bases of support for workers but they also constitute consumer and citizens who might collectively challenge corporate power through boycotts and corporate responsibility campaigns (e.g., the Greensboro K-Mart strike).

Second, when promoting "community" strategies we need to be careful not to treat community as a synonym for locality. Besides the obvious fact that working-class communities live and struggle in a global economy and they need to be aware of how events across both oceans actually affect their lives, the very communities in which they live have never been entirely "local." For immigrant workers, in particular, their communities might be rooted beyond the boundaries of the United States. Workers from China, Japan, the Caribbean, Mexico, Ireland, etc., are often still bound up with the politics of their home country. Peter Kwong’s Chinatown, New York: Labor and Politics, 1930-1950, for example, demonstrates how impossible it is to make sense of Chinese working-class politics in New York City without reference to the Chinese Revolution. Likewise, as several scholars point out Mexican-American labor struggles in the Southwest are incomprehensible without understanding the Mexican Revolution. One particularly noteworthy collection of essays edited by Camille Guerin-Gonzales and Carl Strikwerda, The Politics of Immigrant Workers: Labor Activism and Migration in the World Economy since 1830, brings together an array of scholars across disciplines and fields to study the international movement of workers. The essays demonstrate, among other things, that labor/community activism needs to be understood in an international context. They caution against easy generalizations about globalization and insist that we always consider the world economy, the state, the structure and nature of work itself, the self-activity of immigrant and native workers through labor and political organizations, and working-class culture and community. The authors contribute to expanding our definition of "community" beyond the local precisely because they are interested in
finding the sources of immigrant working-class opposition. The search for the bases of immigrant labor politics led social historian Herbert Gutman to suggest that "cultural baggage" from the homeland shaped immigrant workers' resistance in the U.S.--an idea further elaborated by John Laslett in an essay introducing his notion of "overlapping diasporas" as a way to understand working-class "ethnic" politics.47

Third, in an economic environment in which urban communities of color suffer from the highest rates of unemployment, unions must consider organizing the jobless. This is hardly a new strategy--Socialist and Communists developed unemployed councils and related organizations during the 1930s. Unfortunately, occupation-oriented organizations like labor unions are not designed to accommodate either the jobless or people in different lines of work. Community-based organizations are. Often community-based organizations are the only venue through which to inform people of workplace actions, conflicts, with employers, possible strikes.

Finally, no matter how logical the work/community divide might appear to scholars or even organizers, that is not how life is lived. Working class communities, whether they are working or not, deal with many issues at once--transportation, housing, public education, health care, safety, etc.; and some struggle everyday with racism, sexism, and homophobia. Although this is merely an untested hypothesis, I think its safe to presume that unions that recognize workers as whole people whose community and family ties are essential are also the most successful in building and maintaining an activist membership.
NOTES


3 Defreitas, Gregory, Unionization among racial and ethnic minorities., Vol. 46, Industrial & Labor Relations Review, 01-01-1993, pp 284


6 There are many examples. See Hunter, To 'Joy My Freedom, Kelley, Race Rebels chapter 2; Trotter, Coal, Class, and Color, 199-205; George Sanchez, Becoming, Mexican American; Peter Kwong, Chinatown, New York; Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of St. Luke," Signs 14, no. 3 (1989), 175; Elsa Barkley Brown, "Uncle Ned's Children: Richmond, Virginia's Black Community, 1890-1930," (Ph.D. diss., Kent State University, 1994); Robert


14. Kuhn, et. at., Living Atlanta, 115; see also Hunter, To 'Joy my Freedom


Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White (New York and London: Routledge, 1995); George Lipsitz, The Possessive Investment in Whiteness (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Matthew Frye Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); David Wellman, Portraits of White Racism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 2nd ed.); Michael Goldfield, The Color of Politics; and see also, Alan Draper, Conflict of Interests: Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement in the South, 1954-1968 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). Of course, white workers were never uniformly racist and there are enough stories of interracial working-class solidarity to fill volumes. But we also must recognize the price these men and women had to pay: white workers willing to commit "race suicide" often faced the worst of state repression, ostracism, and sometimes criticism from within their own ranks. It's not an accident, for example, that the most militantly anti-racist unions emerging out of the CIO campaigns of the 1930s and 40s were the main targets of McCarthyite witch hunts.


19 To further reinforce my larger point it should be noted that at the height of anti-Chinese sentiment within the labor movement the only leader in the Knights of Labor to oppose the legislation and support organizing the Chinese was a black man named James Ferrell. Philip Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1981 (New York: International Publishers, 1981), 47.

20 William Harris, The Harder We Run 26; Schwenninger, "James Rapier and the Negro Labor Movement"; Abernathy, "The Knights of Labor in Alabama"; Ward and Rogers, Labor Revolt in Alabama 24-28;


27. Lewis, In Their Own Interests, 47-58, quote from p. 58; see also McCallum, "Songs of Work, Songs of Worship," 14;


29. see Beth Bates, "Old Guard Versus New Crowd: Black Workers Challenge Agenda of the NAACP, 1935-1941," American Historical Review 102, no. 2 (April 1997),


with the Civil Rights Congress generated discord between national NAACP leadership and the Bessemer branch. In fact Executive Secretary Walter White was so fearful of Howard's activities and Nfine Mill's, supposed Communist links that in 1953 he dispatched NAACP Labor Relations Assistant Herbert Hill to investigate the Bessemer branch’s role in the fight between the USWA and Mine Mill. On the left-led unions commitment to racial equality and community organizing, see Maurice Zeithn [NEED CITATION]. Michael Goldfield, The Color of Politics (New York: The New Press, 1997), 145, 193-98, 283-287; Michael. Goldfield, "Race and the CIO: The Possibilities for Racial Egalitarianism During the 1930s and 1940s," International Labor and Working Class History 44 (Fall 1993), 1-32; Steven Rosswurm, ed., The CIO's Left-led Unions (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Donald Critchlow, "Communist Unions and Racism: A Comparative Study of the Responses of the United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers and the National Maritime Union to the Black Question During World War II," Labor History 17, no. 2 (Spring 1976).

32. The story of the expulsion of the left-led unions has been told in numerous places. See for example, Lipsitz,- A Rainbow at Midnight; Rosswurm, ed., The CIO's Left-led Unions [CITATIONS]; Korstad and Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost," ;

The most devastating piece of legislation passed in this period was the Taft-Harley Act (1947). It outlawed closed shops-, restricted workers right to strike; outlawed secondary boycotts (by unions); outlawed sympathy strikes; even made union officials vulnerable to fines and imprisonment if they did not oppose wildcat strikes; restricted freedom of speech; required loyalty oaths; prevented unions from contributing to political campaigns, and a whole lot more.


35. Not surprisingly, university administrators, under pressure from the UAW, industry leaders, and elected officials, tried to shut down the South End. They eventually succeeded after a year, the coup de grace being South End's support for the Palestinian guerrilla group Fateh.


40. Ibid.


43. Stuart Silverstein, "Going to Work on L.A. In Its Many Low-Paid Laborers, Unions See Big Potential for Organizing” Los Angeles Times February 22, 1996.

44. K-Mart Workers Declare Victory,” Justice Speaks 14, no. I (September 1996), 5.


47. See Peter Kwong, Chinatown, New York: Labor and Politics, 1930-1950 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979); and see, among others, Ronald Takaki's, Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian-Americans. On Mexican-American workers and "home" country politics, one could go back to pioneering texts such as Rudolph Acuna's Occupied America; John Hart, Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class. 1860-1931 (Austin, 1978); or Juan Gomez-Quinones essay "First Step: Chicano Labor Conflict and Organizing, 1900-1920," Aztlan 3 (19721). For more recent examples, see George Sanchez, Becoming Mexican-American (Oxford University Press, 1993); Camille Guerin-Gonzales, Mexican