

LABOR'S MAY DAY
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I am so happy to be here today, and I am honored that you have invited me to join with you for this May Day celebration. My friend Ali asked me to share some of my thoughts with you about the United States labor movement -- where it is today, and where it might be tomorrow.

In 1954, President Eisenhower proclaimed the "Class consciousness was altogether un-American" -- and in many ways his statement, while intended to caution people about what they believed, was also a rather accurate reflection of peoples thinking, both then and now.

Almost 50 years before Eisenhower's comments, a member of the International Workers of the World, a union man named Joe Hill, commented on the consciousness of the American worker as well. "They're workers from the neck down," said Joe, "and capitalists from the neck up".

American labor, like everything else, in this country or any other country, needs to be understood within its own context and tradition. I'd like to spend part of my time talking about some realities of the American past that will give us some context, and will help to make sense of where the labor movement is today.

I take the time to tell this history because we can't understand the working class or the labor movement in America without understanding the roles that the myth of equality, and the reality of racism and anti-communism all played in shaping the development of the country, and the worldview of its people. As a result of our history, the working class in this country is

probably one of the more underdeveloped and disunited working classes in the world.

And the union movement, like every other movement in America, reflects that reality. Organized labor in this country has historically reflected a hierarchy based on racial privilege, as well as divisions between the more and less advantaged sectors of the white male working class.

Many things helped to shape that reality. There was no feudal system native to this country, no King or Queen on American soil, and the country was founded with a sort of democratic rhetoric, an ideology that said there are no class divisions here, and that "all men were created equal". That rhetoric was, of course, a lie, but for many in America it was, and is, easier to believe pleasant slogans, than to trust what our eyes really see.

The "all men were created equal" lie was exposed almost as soon as it was said, because America was a nation that was born of treating men (and women) unequally. Years before the Revolutionary War of the 1700's, or the Mexican American War or the Civil War of the 1800's, the stage had already been set for racial distortion in the New Land. It was set so deeply, that 400 years after, racism lives and thrives still, imbedded in the fabric of the nation, affecting working people, unions, and every other aspect of society.

Long before those three wars were fought, in the early 1600's, English colonists murdered ten of thousands of Native Americans, dispossessed tens of thousands more, and took the land they'd lived on for their own. Indentured servants and laborers, both English and African, were sent here to work

the land, and after about 20 or 30 years, they outnumbered the colonists by almost 100 to 1.

The lives of the servants were brutal. They lived in virtual slavery: they were beaten, starved and refused permission to marry. As they were beaten together, African and English servants struggled together to survive and resist their common oppression.

Their resistance culminated in 1676, in an uprising called Bacon's Rebellion. During that uprising, African and English servants joined free workers and farmers, and demanded land and pay for their labor. They burned the Capital of Virginia to the ground, and the colonial rulers of America had to call in the British army to subdue the rebellion. From that uprising, the Virginia gentlemen realized that when Black and white were enslaved together on equal terms, they joined together, organized together, and together, they threatened colonial rule.

To insure that they would never be outnumbered 100 to 1 again, the English colonists needed to destroy the real-life basis of the rebels' unity. They responded with a series of Slave Codes. They loosened the legal restraints, and emancipated white indentured servants -- and wrote new law, and enslaved African servants, and their children, and their children's children.

And slavery, which had been non-racial before the Slave Codes, became racial. The word 'Negro' became synonymous with the word 'slave', and America, the land where all were created equal, became the first country in the world to racialize the institution of slavery.*

The strategy was successful in ending the threat of a united slave or servant class. Poor white people learned their lesson well, and aligned with rich white people -- and color, not class, formed the basis of unity, and any sense of class-consciousness among the so-called 'white' population of early America was blurred and distorted.

Almost two decades before the end of the legal enslavement of African people, the New York Herald, speaking of land belonging to the Mexican people, reported: "We believe it is a part of our destiny to civilize that beautiful country", "and out-live and exterminate her weaker blood", added the American Review. "We must march from ocean to ocean. . . it is the destiny of the white race, it is the destiny of the Anglo-Saxon Race" said the Congressional Globe.

And in the Mexican American War of 1848, almost one fourth of what is now the United States, was taken from the Mexican people -- proving, I suppose, that they also, along with Africans and Native Americans, were an inferior people, and must not have been created equal either.

Twenty years later, while the Klan rode at night and brought terror to Black people throughout the South, white workers and sharecroppers, seeking a better life for themselves and their families, moved West to settle the free land offered by the Homestead Act -- a government land giveaway limited to whites only. So, once again, a large section of the white farming and working class was moved out of direct confrontation with the privileged class of America, and, for the most part, continued to identify with them.

I tell this history to say that the past does not just live in the past. Until the successful campaigns of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's, many of the most powerful unions in the United States excluded African Americans, other workers of color, and women workers of all ethnicities from union membership. Even the unions that hadn't been totally segregated, rarely placed the demands of these most exploited workers at the forefront of their agendas.

This division not only limited the power of the labor movement at home; it impeded labor solidarity and organization beyond this country's borders as well. While the AFL-CIO was glad to merge with the Canadian Labor Congress back in the 1950's, it refused

to extend the protection of its so-called "international unions" south of the border, or in any other direction where the majority of the voting membership was not white.

Labor was, however, willing to give union money to help the American Institute for Free Labor Development, a government sponsored program designed to destabilize progressive unions in Central America and Africa. Which is why some people here started calling the largest labor federation in America the AFL-CIA.

I tell this history because the past does not just live in the past. We can see it at work almost anywhere we look. We can see it in the struggles of the United Farm Workers of America, and realize that farm workers have toiled in the fields for decades -- but they were women and men whose ancestors weren't from Europe, and they weren't organized until 1965.

Home Health Care workers in Los Angeles, who are almost all women, and almost all women of color, were organized for the first time just this year. And today, even as we speak, domestic workers -- the women who clean the houses and apartments, and change the sheets of the beds for tens of millions in America, still have no health care, no vacation, no sick days, no unemployment insurance -- and, to the best of my knowledge, no union has asked if they want to consider an organizing campaign.

The inability of American labor to confront historic divisions based on privilege and race has weakened labor's power, distorted its politics, and left the union movement unable to defend the interests of the working class they were organized to represent.

In the 1930's, this country saw a brief period of activist, left-led unionism. Workers in basic industries produced some of the most militant actions in the history of the U.S. During that time, strikes and walkouts in coal and auto combined with marches of hundreds and thousands of unemployed workers, and together they brought to birth social security,

unemployment insurance, and a host of other programs that have benefited us all.

But the thirties ended, and during the 40's, despite hundreds of walkouts and wildcats, organized labor maintained an official 'no strike' pledge during the Second World War. And in the 1950's, the accommodation of most of the unions to Red scares and McCarthyite purges resulted in the destruction of left leadership and left ideology in the union movement -- and gave power within the ranks of labor to the same backward union forces who had allowed the purges to begin with.

It wasn't until the late 60's and early 70's that political and racial exclusion in unions began to ease. By that time, we were left with a conservative movement, led by the well-paid, pale, male elite of the working class. It was a movement committed solely to retaining benefits for workers already organized, at the expense of organizing the unorganized, or reaching out to the unemployed.

During the 70's, with the promise of job security as bait, union leaders in auto and steel encouraged their members to accept the wage and benefits cuts that management said they needed. The workers were afraid for their future. They signed the contracts. The company executives smiled, took the millions in givebacks that unions agreed to, and used the money to build new plants overseas. Then they fired the workers who gave them the money.

Employers told the laid off workers that they had done the best they could for them -- "We tried to keep the plants open", they said, "and keep workers on the job". "We're sorry", they said, "that families were hurt -- we never meant for that to happen". Over a hundred years before the plants closed, Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "Even a dog can distinguish between being stumbled over and being kicked."

When Ronald Reagan took office in 1980, he and his friends thought the time might be

ripe to deal a deathblow to unions. And so, in 1981, counting on the weakness of the AFL-CIO, Ronald Reagan gambled, and fired 11,400 striking air traffic controllers, and permanently replaced them. His gamble paid off. Labor leaders refused to call a general strike. Union members crossed picket lines. A few solidarity rallies were held across the country -- but, all in all, the leaders of the AFL-CIO -- and most of its members, just went about their daily routines.

Business interests took their cue from the ease of the White House victory, and waged a frontal assault on unions. They cut salaries, reduced benefits, and downsized. They made obscene profits, got obscene tax breaks, and tripled the national deficit. And they did it with impunity -- knowing that the labor movement had neither the will nor the vision to fight them.

What we ended up with by the mid 1980's, was a compromised, diminished labor movement, unable to lead -- unable to speak for, or to protect its own members. Based on that reality, it's no surprise that the numbers and the power of unions steadily declined -- and were reduced, by the mid 1990's, close to the point of irrelevancy.

As if all this weren't enough, side by side with labor's internal problems, technology was steadily encroaching on union jobs in the United States. Automation, robotics, and advancing technology had transformed the economy, and had profoundly changed both the perception and the reality of who comprises the working class.

Less and less point of production workers remain in America. There are almost no big plants left here, almost no large assembly line production. Machine operations are contracted out to small business, to subcontractors, to garage industries and to prison industries. Few workers are left in basic industries -- and the jobs that aren't contracted out -- are outsourced, shipped to other countries where former farmers and peasants join with U.S. prisoners and are

now the 'low wage to no wage' point of production workers for U.S. corporations.

And as a result, millions of workers who used to be the backbone of union militancy and strength, millions of workers who used to earn decent wages in auto, steel, and other point of production industries in the United States have been displaced, downsized, out-sourced and contracted out. Work at defense plants, long a source of relatively good waged work is shrinking, coal and oil have already shrunk. Public sector employment is downsizing as well, as hard won government programs are being dismantled, piece by piece.

Public programs for all of us, fought for and won by labor in the 30's, are being "privatized" away, and are daily disappearing. And as a result, education, health care, retirement and a host of other services that have long been the responsibility of society as a whole, are now shifting and are becoming the responsibility of the individual. And the loss of jobs in basic industry and the public sector have disproportionately impacted workers of color, especially African American workers, who had found decent paying jobs in the very areas now disappearing from the economy.

There are still some public programs left, and there is still a small core of relatively high paying jobs -- \$16.00 or more an hour -- but the percentage of stable, decent paying jobs with benefits, is steadily shrinking. Today, the largest employer in the country is an agency called 'Manpower', an agency that maintains a permanent pool of part time, temporary workers that it hires out to employers as independent contractors -- workers without unemployment benefits -- without health care -- without job security.

As working people were reeling from the loss of their jobs, men in corporate boardrooms were celebrating huge increases in profits, created by labor cuts at home, and the super-exploitation of workers in other countries. We can look at Nike, who pays

contract laborers in Asia two dollars and twenty-five cents a day. And sneakers that cost three dollars and fifty cents to make, cost a hundred and forty dollars to buy. And Nike is just one example of hundreds of examples that define and expose the greed of transnational corporations.

As the investment capital of these large corporations traveled the globe with the speed of light, the union movement in the United States seemed frozen in time, glued to a past reality, unable and unwilling to deal with a technologically transformed economy, or a political system whose two parties seemed to have forgotten that unions existed.

The labor movement had been outpaced, out thought, and out organized by transnational capital. Union leaders, themselves the products of this country's history, had no new strategies or new visions to offer. And so they were unable to lead.

The owners of the technology did not have that problem. As corporations became transnational, their expansion strategies kept pace with what was possible, and they became a sort of global "Manpower" agency, and utilized the whole world as their labor pool. They divided countries by areas of work, and passed laws to protect them from the interference of nations, and through GATT, NAFTA, the World Trade Organization, they made it clear that transnational capital was now more powerful than the national interests of sovereign nations.

With its membership shrinking daily, seeing that its very life was at stake, organized labor moved to protect itself. In 1994, there was an unprecedented battle for the leadership of the AFL-CIO. Lane Kirkland, who held that leadership for almost 20 years, was defeated by John Sweeney, Richard Trumka, and Linda Chavez Thompson, a slate of candidates who campaigned on a pledge of organizing the unorganized, of democratic decision making, and of re-energizing the labor movement.

The slate won, and its victory brought with it new energy, new ideas, and hundreds of new organizing campaigns. There is a 'new unionism' breathing new life into the American labor movement. In Los Angeles, the "Living Wage" campaign has succeeded in both raising workers pay, and laying the basis for organizing low-paid and unorganized workers. It is in those workers, overwhelmingly women and men of color, long ignored by organized labor, that the union movement in this city has invested its future.

These new organizing drives signal a significant break with Labor's history, and we need to applaud them, and find heart and hope in them. But revitalizing labor is not a quick or simple process. Even with the allocation of millions from the AFL-CIO for new organizing, even after signing up hundreds of thousand of new workers, organized labor has barely kept up with the loss of jobs due to downsizing and outsourcing, and still represents less than 13% of the total workforce.

There is no question that the AFL-CIO is making serious effort to revitalize the union movement. But, along with that effort, they have put forth no new strategic vision to deal with either a technologically transformed economy or an internationalized labor pool. And so when Brother Sweeney says how fast union campaigns are moving, I find that encouraging, but also disquieting. It reminds a bit of the captain of a plane who comes on the intercom and says -- "I've got good news and I've got bad news. The good news is we're making incredible time. The bad news is we don't know where we're going".

Over the last 30 to 40 years, there has been an absence of any real "internationalism" in our so-called "international union", and there's been no real discussion of issues by the members. Power in most union structures has rested mostly the hands of the top leadership, or the union staff. In the last 10-15 years, rank and file movements like 'Teamsters for a Democratic Union' and the

'New Directions' caucus in the United Auto Workers were organized to help bring democratic process back to the union membership. Any "New Unionism" has to continue that process. Has to embrace the members of the union as the leaders of the union. Not the staff. Not the General Manager. The members.

One of the projects of the "New Unionism" is an AFL-CIO national training program to recruit and train students to lead organizing drives. New organizing drives are good. But training college educated, technically proficient, highly skilled youth to organize people who may have less technical ability and less education than does their organizing staff, is problematic. It creates an imbalance of power, producing staff with more expertise and more decision making clout than the union members.

For those of us who believe that working people have the potential to transform society, the potential to change power relationships, to create a different tomorrow, this is a critically important issue. Because the tendency of staff led unions is to take representation out of the hands of the workers, to take decision making power out of the hands of the rank and file workers, and when they do that, staff led unions disempower workers. They play the same role in keeping working people quiet and untrained in leadership as does society as a whole.

Turning this picture around is a tall order. It requires future vision. It requires that organized labor becomes 'class conscious'. Part of what that means is that we reject the philosophy of Samuel Gompers, the first president of the American Federation of Labor who said that "the purpose of unions was to put a carpet on every floor and a picture on every wall".

As long as we accept that definition, as long as we see ourselves as consumers, not workers -- as long as the goal of our struggle is 'products', not 'power' -- and as long as the unions we belong to reinforce that idea,

we won't see ourselves as agents of social change. And 'class struggle' will refer to the problems of the working class, as we struggle to pay for the goods that capital wants us to buy.

Another part of what becoming 'class conscious' means is that the struggle against sexism and racism has to be a primary struggle of organized labor. Without waging that struggle, the working class, which is made up of women and men all the nationalities of America, cannot be strong, because it can't be united. And its vision won't be clear, because the most oppressed workers will not have helped to shape that vision.

Without waging and winning that struggle, unions can't become truly international, and will remain unable to challenge transnational capital. When workers in Indonesia, Guatemala and the Philippines have the same employer as workers in Los Angeles, its time for the American labor movement to respond. Time for the American labor movement to help join those workers together, and bring some reality to the slogan, "Labor solidarity knows no borders".

That is one part of what 'class consciousness' means. Another part of what it means is that the AFL-CIO has to get its AF out of bed with management, out of bed with Democratic Party, and out of bed with capitalist aspirations. It means that the labor movement needs a Labor Party that's more than a national pressure group. It needs a party that capable of developing programs that deal with the realities of today -- and tomorrow. A party that will engage community dialogue, community struggles -- that will run candidates, and lift popular struggles to a political plane. Through that kind of party we can think together, plan together, and together, learn how to lead.

I speak this history, and tell this story to help us to be equal to the job that needs to be done. If we gloss over the problems of labor, if we romanticize its history, or its present

reality, we won't be prepared for the struggle that needs to be waged.

The truth is that changing labor's way of thinking and being will require a transformation of the union movement at every level. But nothing less will serve us. Because as long as you and I have no party to speak for us, and no control over the economic system we live in, we'll continue to be run over by those who have both. New technology will take over more and more jobs -- and you and I will be working two or three jobs in the service sector just to pay our bills.

And that is already happening. Twenty or thirty years ago, one income per family, for many people in America, took care of the bills. And people were working about 37-40 hours a week. Now, it takes two or more incomes to keep a roof over our heads and the creditors away, and we're working more hours than ever, and real income hasn't risen in 20 years.

Last year, corporations collected almost 170 billion dollars in tax funded federal handouts. All the social programs in America -- schools, housing, welfare -- all of them combined equal about 50 billion dollars. Which goes a long way to explain why 1 in 4 children live in poverty, and why Johnny still can't read.

Last year in the United States, the average salary of the top CEO's of the country was \$57,000,000. That is more money than was earned by the combined labor of 462 families. And that's up \$10,000,000 from 1997's top CEO take home of \$47,000,000.

While these CEO's, and other high rollers income increased by an average 36% last year, people like us were lucky to see a 3-4% increase in our paychecks. It's almost as if corporate managers looked at working people and said, "I up'd my income. Up yours."

The truth is that the elites who run the country and own the technology no longer need a large pool of workers in America to

make a profit. They need relatively few of us. And by itself, no amount of union reform or union organizing can change that truth. We need to be clear -- we are no longer getting, and we can no longer expect to get, a bigger piece of the pie. If we want to survive, if we want the lives of our children to be full and secure, we better stop focusing on pie crumbs, and start figuring out what it takes to change both the cooks and the recipe.

We can do that. It's not impossible. It just needs new ways of thinking. New strategies. New vision. New approaches to the question of work itself.

We can forget about Samuel Gompers, and his carpet and his pictures, and we can start to be equal to the time we live in and stop seeing ourselves as 'consumers' -- and stop giving our allegiance to a system that hurts us. We can stop supporting political parties that don't support us. We can challenge an economic system that is threatening our survival. A system that is polluting the earth, displacing its people, and threatening the future of our children. A system whose concern is for profit, not people.

We can do that. And in doing it, we can create a new culture in the labor movement. A culture that will embrace working class people in this country and in all countries, as our sisters and brothers. So that throughout the world, we can bring about the day when the slogan of labor will be the reality of labor: 'the union will make us strong', and 'an injury to one, will truly be an injury to all'.

Thank you.

* P. 4 For more background information, please see "Shining the Light on White" by Sharon Martin