

Black Labor Vows 'We Will Not Be Made Expendable

Written by BAR executive editor Glen Ford ID3708
Wednesday, 06 June 2007 23:29 -

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The global "Race to the Bottom" is fast erasing Blacks from the ever-shrinking unionized labor force, an historical crisis that demands an all-out campaign to dismantle the corporate agenda. Black Labor, which has always seen itself as an extension of the Black Freedom Movement, gathered in Chicago for a frenzy of activity at the 36th annual convention of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists. Unlike "traditional" trade unionists, the CBTU understands the need for a revamping of the Current Order, "which cannot be cured, as it is." Black folks have already seen the bottom, and will not go back.

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"CBTU has from the beginning viewed the labor struggle as a people's struggle."

"We're tired of living between 'hard times" and 'bad times,'" said William Lucy, addressing the 36th annual convention of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists ([CBTU](#)), late last month. "We cannot cure the system, as it is. There is an urgent need for a New Economic Subscription." The new arrangement requires that "we dismantle the corporate agenda."

The Hyatt Regency Hotel convention site, its two towers perched high above the Chicago River, drew 1,200 delegates and one presidential contender - Barack Obama, a Chicagoan and the only candidate to accept CBTU President Lucy's invitation. But the most painful absence was the army of de-unionized and unemployed workers - disproportionately Black - ejected from decent-wage employment by the "corporate agenda...the U.S. Chamber of Commerce agenda... the agenda of the National Association of Manufacturers...the agenda of the rich and wealthy," as Lucy put it.

The devastation pre-dates - but has been exponentially increased under - George Bush. An Economic Policy Institute [study](#) showed a nearly 900,000 net jobs loss due to NAFTA trade policies from 1993 to 2002 - 78 percent of them in manufacturing. An AFL-CIO report registered [three million](#) manufacturing jobs lost between 2001 and 2005. And of the union jobs lost in 2004, 55 percent "were held by black workers, even though they

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represented only 13 percent of total union membership," according the Black labor writer [Dwight Kirk](#)

. "More stunningly," said Kirk, "African American women accounted for 70 percent of the union jobs lost by women in 2004."

"Those of us who are here are the lucky ones," Lucy told the CBTU conventioners.

A Homecoming

The CBTU's first mass gathering was in Chicago, at the old LaSalle Hotel, in 1972, the same year William Lucy became secretary-treasurer of the now 1.4 million-member American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). At that inaugural convention, the 1,200 delegates all paid their own way. Today, the vast majority are sent by their affiliated unions.

1972 was also a watershed year for U.S. labor in general, the end of a post-World War Two era when the poorest workers made the greatest income gains. From 1973 on, the richest segment of the population grew ever fatter, while manufacturing jobs were exported to the super-exploitation zones of the planet, and unionized workers dwindled to only 7 percent in the private sector, 12 percent among public employees.

"The rich and powerful have apparently concluded that millions of people in this country and millions around the world are permanently expendable," wrote Lucy, in a pre-speech release. "In their hands, war famine, disease, incarceration, and random violence have now become the real weapons of mass destruction, eliminating those who can no longer be absorbed into the economic system or be exploited by its corporate masters.

The CBTU, which "has survived longer than any other Black labor organization in American history," spans the entire period of American manufacturing and worker income decline. "When you pair George W. Bush with Dead-eye Dick Cheney, the modern-day Machiavelli, you have the scariest White House duo since Nixon-Agnew," said Lucy.

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"Labor, CBTU, can beat City Hall."

In the decades since Nixon, as car- and steel-makers shrunk, Wal-Mart emerged as the largest employer in the United States and unchallenged leader in foreign outsourcing, union-suppression, and hyper-aggressive assaults on the fragile social safety net. Chicago labor - especially Black labor - fought valiantly to keep the predatory retailer out of the city, and then succeeded in passing a Big Box ordinance mandating Wal-Mart and other mega-stores pay \$10 an hour wages by 2010. Despite studies that showed [90 percent of Black Chicagoans](#) supported the measure, Mayor Richard Daley vetoed it with the help of half the Black city aldermen. Labor retaliated against Daley's minions in the next election cycle, [unseating](#) a number of them.

"The Chicago Chapter [of CBTU] beat city Hall!" Lucy told cheering delegates. "In the end, some folks flipped on us, so we flipped on them. Some of them are gone. Labor, CBTU, can beat City Hall."

The emphasis on grassroots, down-and-dirty organizing outside the shop floor - on enlisting the broader community in the battle against corporate domination of society - is nothing new for the CBTU, which has from the beginning viewed the labor struggle as a people's struggle. "Since the earliest days of this nation when democracy was built on racial exploitation," says the CBTU's [website](#), "black workers have risked their lives to protect and empower their communities through agitation, collective action and faith."

A movement to "[dismantle the corporate agenda](#)" cannot be accomplished by old-style, guild-like labor organizations focused only on narrow workplace issues - especially when the very existence of the workplace is in question. "Our mission is to give our chapters the capacity to hold citywide economic forums," said Lucy, to hold "town hall meetings, educate our people about Wal-Mart, make life difficult for them."

The Indictment

Just as Martin Luther King, Jr. found that he could not lead a people-emancipating movement if it were constrained by narrow definitions of "civil rights" - that the War in Vietnam crippled the

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War on Poverty, and that corporate rule was antithetical to democracy - so the Black labor movement understood early on that its mission is to resist the totality of oppression, and to envision a new world. The revolution - which is what dismantling the corporate agenda must mean - will not be ghettoized, narrowly trade unionized, but must be generalized. This requires that leaders undertake the deepest analysis and broadest critique of the society and larger world they inhabit.

"The nation is less safe and humane than it was five years ago," said Lucy to a crowd comprised of over a thousand labor and community leaders in the own right. "The stock market hit 13,000 two weeks ago - how many of y'all feel richer?" He cites a report that shows "50 percent of American workers live paycheck to paycheck" - a necessary condition for dragooning Americans into a global race to the bottom.

Sixteen million Americans are in "deep and severe poverty," while one percent of the population owns 20 percent of the wealth, "the highest since 1929."

In 1980, just twenty seven years ago, corporate chief executive officers earned forty two times that of the average worker. Today the CEO earns four hundred eleven times the average worker. The average CEO earns more on the first day of the year than the average workers earn all year.

CEO salaries multiply at an obscene rate. "There's nothing legal you can do for that kind of money," said Lucy. The crowd responded with knowing, bitter laughter.

"The stock market hit 13,000 two weeks ago - how many of y'all feel richer?"

"Why is the only guaranteed housing our government will offer our children, a jail cell," he continued. "Folk commit crime because they need money" - a fact that is obvious to people who actually live in Black America, where Columbine-like events are viewed as white-folks-crazy behavior. "Crime went down five consecutive years during the Clinton years." Of course it did: more people were at work at the remaining good jobs. Today, violent [crime indexes](#) are up, especially for offenses usually associated with economic motives and tensions, such as robberies and drug gang-related murders.

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The trade unionist's emphasis on economic issues, and the Black activist's on the general condition of one's people, are combined in the CBTU. Delegates recognized - to a man and woman - the inherent contradiction between imperial warfare and domestic progress. None of the broad goals outlined by Lucy - that all who want a job should have a job; workers should live in dignity with healthcare and retirement security for their families; all workers should have the opportunity to form a union and bargain collectively, and share in the prosperity of the economy - can be accomplished in an environment of eternal warfare, and resultant domestic militarization, ethnic scapegoating, and shrinking social space.

African Americans, historically unburdened by notions of American Manifest Destiny, find no contradiction in being good unionists and anti-war activists, too. The nine-tenths of Blacks that voted against George Bush know he is not "our" president.

"Bush is the most isolated, incompetent president in American history. He turned the Department of Defense into the Department of Evil," said Lucy, to loud applause. These actions are inseparable from the imposition of a "cutthroat economy in 'which greed is good" and people are told to 'make it on your own.'"

Roots of Solidarity

African Americans have been, collectively, "on their own" for most of post-Columbus history in the Western Hemisphere. For that historical reason, the term "self-help" assumes a social dimension, rather than an individualistic one, in Black America. At the CBTU convention, teams fanned out to workshops that explored issues such as Workplace Violence, HIV/AIDS, Building Unity Across Color Lines, the Fundamentals of Organizing, and The Case Against Smithfield Packing, as well as money management, personal health care and other more mundane concerns. For Black trade unionists, it's all part of the same community-building-protecting cloth.

Labor activists Susan Washington and Cecelie Counts prompted delegates to discuss the general and specific meaning of graphs showing the vast economic changes that have occurred in the U.S. since the mid-20th Century. Two-thirds of the "An America That Works for All" workshop participants were female, a ratio that held for most workshops - and no surprise given that Black women are the most union-friendly demographic in the nation, and are also the

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backbone of activist and church organizations.

Ms. Washington explained the results of the breakdown in the social contract in terms now familiar to middle-aged parents: boomerang kids. "You put them out, and they come right back - sometimes with their own kids," said Washington. Heads nodded all around.

"Black women are the most union-friendly demographic in the nation."

At the "Building Unity Across Lines of Color" workshop, organizers encouraged the nearly all-Black gathering to be introspective. After eliciting common stereotypes of union leaders ("party too much," "corrupt," "selfish," "dancing with management," "selling members down the drain"), participants, all local union leaders, were cautioned: "We often turn stereotypes against other people in the same way as people use them against us."

Workshop leader Sharon Lovelady Hall held up an old LP recording to explain how "each one of us has a 'record' inside us. Sometimes our 'record'" - our group background - "speaks for us, not our intelligence," she said.

Virulently anti-worker [Smithfield Foods](#) looms second only to Wal-Mart as a target of broad-based union action. "We're dealing with a corporation that has no corporate conscience," said Bill Lucy, making the rounds of various workshops. The company operates the world's largest hog processing plant, in Tarheel, North Carolina, and has been cited by [Human Rights Watch](#) for violating international workplace standards.

"We've got to make Smithfield synonymous with violation of workers' rights," said Lucy, in the same way that Shell Oil was subjected to global condemnation for its alliance with white rule in Africa - a campaign in which Lucy was a key player.

Organizer Rigo Valdez was careful to remind the workshop audience that American unions are forbidden by law (!) to advocate boycotts - although individual union members are free to engage in such activities. Therefore, community coalitions are mounting campaigns in important Smithfield Ham markets - Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Washington, Raleigh, Nashville, Atlanta, Richmond and Dallas - to make the Smithfield name smell as bad as the

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environs polluted by its gargantuan lakes of hog excrement. Informational materials will be posted in barber and beauty shops, and supermarkets targeted, one by one, until the stench is cleared.

Organize or Disappear

Black unionists may have emerged even stronger from the [Big Labor Split](#) of 2005, when for a time it seemed that both the AFL-CIO and breakaway unions that later formed "

[Change to Win](#)

"

were jettisoning commitments to diversity in the trade union movement. No such cleavage occurred within the CBTU, where SEIU (Change to Win), AFSCME (AFL-CIO) and unionists of all affiliations refused to allow labor's "top management" squabbles to intrude on Black solidarity.

Solidarity with one another encourages others to seek solidarity with us.

"You risk your family's well being just to join a union."

Communications Workers of America (CWA) President Larry Cohen is a founder of [Jobs With Justice](#),

and has addressed many CBTU gatherings. An early speaker at the convention, Cohen launched into a push for final passage of the

[Employee Free Choice Act](#)

. The measure, which would make it far easier to unionize workers, passed the U.S. House in March and comes up in the Senate, later this year. But George Bush has already vowed to veto it.

"No other country in the world has the obstacle course for workers trying to get union rights," said Cohen, "except Columbia, where you get murdered."

George Bush is a great fan of the Columbian regime, too.

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The U.S. has "gone backward" since 1935, when the [National Labor Relations Act](#) was passed, said the CWA leader. "You risk your family's well being just to join a union."

Immigration, the great bugaboo of contemporary U.S. politics, boils down to a simple equation. "Guest worker programs...create two classes of workers," said Linda Chavez-Thompson, executive vice-president of the AFL-CIO. As for the mish-mash McCain-Kennedy bill, "We don't support it. It is a joke." As a Mexican-American, she remembers the old "Bracero" guest workers labor scheme as "an indentured worker program."

Workers can only bargain collectively, when they all have equal rights. The curse of the U.S. labor movement - the most important factor in its failure to become an independent political force in national affairs, unlike labor in other developed countries - was generations of white labor insistence on maintaining a two-tier system of employment, with themselves on top. In the end, the whole labor edifice began crumbling down.

Health care, the lack of it, is the most potently popular issue in America, today. Yet not one of the top-tier Democratic presidential aspirants proposes anything that resembles a universal health care plan. Republican front-runner Rudolph Giuliani ridicules the whole concept as "socialized medicine," said AFSCME union President Gerald McEntee. The audience, heavy with New Yorkers, burst into "boo's" at the mention of Giuliani's name. "They [Republicans] are enriching the members of their party and impoverishing everyone else," roared McEntee.

Sensing a good crowd, McEntee explicated the significance of George Bush's middle initial. "'W' stands for "wicked," "wretched," "worst," and "wrongheaded." Only the elderly, and very busy note-takers, stayed in their seats.

McEntee knows where Black folks buttons are located. "Katrina was the most bungled disaster response in our nation's history.... Bush turned his back on New Orleans and the entire Gulf Coast."

Then the peroration: "We're not spreading democracy in Iraq, we're spreading violence and anarchy. We want the troops to come home today!" Everybody said "Yeah," like Stevie Wonder

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on "Fingertips."

"Republicans are enriching the members of their party and impoverishing everyone else."

Rep. Bennie Thompson, the sole Black representative from the once Black-majority state of Mississippi, is a special friend of CBTU. Now chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, which oversees 22 formerly separate agencies employing, at its post-9/11 inception [180,000 workers](#),

Thompson promised to fight for union rights in the Department.

The funniest of CBTU's guests, Thompson rejected the contention that immigrants are doing jobs that Americans refuse to perform. "There are more than enough jobs to go around," he said, "people just don't want to PAY!" The Congressional Black Caucus "will continue to be the single largest source of support for labor in the U.S. House. Not Hispanics, not Blue Dogs - you gotta come to the Black Dog!"

The debacle in Iraq has so poisoned world opinion of Americans, Thompson is personally concerned about traveling abroad. On one of his overseas journeys, "Somebody said to me, 'You look like you're from the Caribbean.' I said, 'Yeah, Mon!'" Bones audibly cracked in the convention hall.

The Obama Phenomenon

A day later than scheduled, Sen. Barack Obama arrived at the Chicago Regency Hyatt. As a favorite son on several levels, this was his audience. Obama named specific union leaders who, "if it were not for them, I wouldn't be a United States Senator." He harkened back to the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike, which drew Dr. Martin Luther King to his final destination (and where a young Bill Lucy further developed his own vision of Freedom Movement-Labor struggle).

"Your agenda has been my agenda," Obama told the unionists, endorsing the fight to "give employees a free choice." He spoke in general terms about the paltriness of the minimum

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wage. On health care, the candidate vowed to "save money by cutting bureaucracy...by making sure that people are not getting fat off the system."

Education would be best served by giving teachers and schools "more flexibility" and providing "them more resources to do it."

African Americans, he noted, are "twice as likely to be unemployed. African American women make 66 cents on the dollar.... That's un-American, it's got to change." Obama is in favor of job training, and a change in the "trading system with other countries."

Each vague point was punctuated by enthusiastic applause.

The night before, Obama had voted against Democratic leadership's "compromise" Iraq War Funding bill. "The way that we are going to show that we support the troops," he said, "is to start bringing some of them home." (emphasis mine)

"People are hungry for change. They are crying out for something new," said Obama, winding up. "You are not only winning an election for Democrats, you are gonna put one of your OWN in the White House."

Nobody sat after that. Obama spent at least an hour in the hotel's lower level, taking pictures with delegates. He had not made a substantive statement of intent on any of the CBTU's treasured and very definitive positions, other than the Employee Free Choice Act.

But in a sense, it doesn't matter. Obama is a politician. Movements are meant to make and break politicians, not the other way around.

It's Movement Time.

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