

LABOR MUST LEAD THE FIGHT AGAINST WHITE SUPREMACY

America is in crisis. The forces of bigotry and white supremacy in our nation, emboldened by President Donald Trump, are pulling America apart. Delegates to the 2017 AFL-CIO Convention recognized this danger, making clear that “[w]e must utterly reject calls for division among working people or efforts to exclude any part of the working class from the labor movement.” In unanimously adopting a resolution reaffirming the labor movement's mission, America’s labor federation declared that “[w]e must stand up against hate and scapegoating wherever it appears in our nation.”

In the nearly two years since, racism, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism—sexism, homophobia and transphobia—the cornerstones of white supremacy—have continued to directly threaten workers, our unions and our democracy. President Trump’s inflammatory claims of a border “invasion” and targeting of duly elected members of Congress with the age-old screed of “go back to where you came from,” has provided fresh cover and encouragement to the agents of hate in our society.

Our government is minimizing and dehumanizing working people, including union members. Too many in power—whether CEOs or members of Congress—continue to openly degrade, harass and discriminate against women. Employers are firing LGBTQ workers under the guise of religious freedom.

America’s welcome mat, long a beacon of hope for immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, is being bulldozed and paved over, replaced with a clear message: “You’re not welcome here.” President Trump’s top immigration official twisted the inscription on the Statue of Liberty, arguing that working people of color aren’t welcome in our country. Words matter. Workers whose only crime is working hard for a better life are being arrested. The El Paso, Texas, shooter traveled more than 600 miles to kill Mexican immigrants.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called the race-baiter and the enemies of labor a twin-headed creature. He understood that the guardians of the status quo want workers poor, weak and divided. Indeed, the economic impact of hate—inequality, austerity and bitter division—is felt most by those who have long suffered from systemic discrimination. The cure for this cancer has always been the same: a robust and inclusive democracy powered by working-class solidarity.

The labor movement categorically rejects the notion that only some working people deserve respect and others can be dehumanized, denigrated or discarded. The AFL-CIO Constitution begins with our pledge “to join with all persons, of whatever nationality or faith, who cherish the cause of democracy and the call of solidarity, to grace the planet with these achievements.” In our 2017 resolution, we rededicated ourselves to “democracy—to bring hope to those who have given up on government of the people and by the people, and to stand resolutely against those who would substitute hate and division for dignity and solidarity.” Today, we must continue that work unabated.

Women, people of color and the LGBTQ community make up more than 70% of the workforce. Nearly 1 in 5 workers in our country is foreign born, with countless more who are the children or grandchildren of immigrants. We all belong here, and we will fight to protect the rights and dignity of all workers.

Unions have an essential role to play in dismantling bigotry and white supremacy, and we must approach that work with greater urgency in this toxic political climate. We are well-acquainted with the danger of divide and rule tactics.

With each new tragedy and outrage, we are reminded that a well-organized and united workforce is key to winning respect and creating safe and fair conditions that protect the lives and livelihoods of all working families. A collective bargaining agreement is one of the most powerful tools workers have to address pernicious gaps in pay and treatment based on race, status, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity. Indeed, workers who have been most harmed by structural oppression are the ones helped most by a union contract.

The union pay advantage is higher for women and people of color, especially Latinas. In more than half of all states, a union contract is the only thing protecting LGBTQ workers from being fired because of who they are. A collective bargaining agreement makes workplaces safer by creating a formal process to address harassment and discrimination and ensuring that workers have representation as we exercise our rights and pursue justice. Many union contracts also promote such benefits as language equity, prayer rights, citizenship support, bias training and limits on employer interaction with immigration authorities.

But we must do even more. Unions are the fabric of our communities. We are uniquely positioned to fight for an inclusive democracy—through mobilization and education—like fostering the tough conversations amongst ourselves recommended by the AFL-CIO Labor Commission on Racial and Economic Justice: voter registration and protection, immigration and citizenship, and a grassroots political movement with the power and leverage to win good jobs, good schools and opportunity for all. We can, as we pledged in our 2017 resolution, “bring hope to those who have given up on government of the people and by the people, and...stand resolutely against those who would substitute hate and division for dignity and solidarity.”

America’s unions will continue to be on the front lines opposing efforts to rip workers apart for profit. Solidarity among working people—and a democracy that serves the most vulnerable among us—is the best tool we have to overcome bigotry and build power and promote equality in our workplaces and our communities. We will not rest until liberty and justice can be accessed by all.

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