

Labor Union History: Looking Past Differences

By Ed Leavy, SVFT Executive Union Representative

The basic tenet of unionism is that we are strongest when we stand together. Unfortunately, people often tend to use differences as a reason to break into factions, and unions are not immune to this tendency. Throughout labor history, the rights of workers have suffered when union leadership and union members have focused on the differences between them rather than the issues that unite them. Not surprisingly, the issue that has divided the American labor movement most often has been race.

From the early stages of the labor movement, some union leaders have understood that the needs of all workers must transcend race. In the 1880s, AFL leader Samuel Gompers told his membership, "As working men we are not justified in refusing [African-Americans] the right of the opportunity to organize for their common protection... If organizations do, we will only make enemies of them, and of necessity they will be antagonistic to our interests." In the first AFL convention, held in 1886, four black workers' groups sent representatives. The convention adopted a resolution stating that the AFL would "never discriminate against a fellow worker on account of color, creed, or nationality."

This idea paid dividends in an 1892 general strike in New Orleans. Streetcar drivers went on strike to demand a 12-hour day; they had been working 16-hour shifts. The rest of the AFL locals, black and white, went out on strike in support of the streetcar drivers. Though the individual locals were not integrated, the strike became integrated as each unit demanded a 10-hour day, overtime wages, and exclusive union bargaining rights. The strike was overseen by the newly-formed Workingmen's Amalgamated Council, which had representation from both races.

The strike was not completely successful. Louisiana governor Murphy J. Foster threatened to bring in the militia, and the strikers returned to work. The Board of Trade, which had tried to break the strike with virulent race-baiting, refused to recognize the union as the exclusive bargaining agent of the workers. But the unions did prevail on the hours and overtime issues. Gompers called the strike "a very bright ray of hope for the future of organized labor."

Unfortunately, that hope soon dimmed because white workers refused to work with their African-American brethren, and union leaders shied away from confronting the problem of racism directly. Samuel Gompers tried to strengthen the commitment of Southern unions to the AFL by retreating from the AFL's earlier declarations, and stated, "We cannot overcome racism in a day." The exclusion of African-Americans from the labor movement meant there was always a pool of non-union workers able to take jobs that union workers had once held. Racial antagonism only intensified, and the fractures became increasingly difficult to mend. The problems of racism still exist today, in both the labor movement and the nation at large, but in far more muted tones. The lessons from the success of the 1892 strike and its unfortunate aftermath are still important today. We are strongest when we work past our differences to reach common goals. We are weakest when we ignore our values, our principles, and our common humanity, for practical reasons. When we do so, we lose, and deserve to lose.

Most of the information for this article is from There is Power in a Union by Philip Dray