

Race and Class: What About the Working Poor?

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ONE STRIKING FEATURE of political debate in the country today is that — while every commentator, pundit and political observer talks about and focuses on the concerns of the super-rich and the middle class — few ever talk about the plight of the disadvantaged, those on food stamps and welfare and particularly the working poor.

Most welfare recipients, unemployed, underemployed and working poor don't vote in large numbers. They're trying to survive day by day. The civil rights groups once based "The Movement" on winning equality and helping the working poor. That changed as the old leaders became more integrated into mainstream politics and business.

Today these organizations' primary base is the "middle class" — those losing homes to foreclosures and jobs to outsourcing overseas — and their solution to problems is electoral, not extralegal actions. When actions are organized it is to advance the electoral agenda of the Democratic Party.

This is in contrast to the major marches on Washington in the 1960s, which demanded that the institutions of the government — the White House, Congress and courts — take action. Then the party in power was a secondary consideration.

The poor, who are disproportionately Black and Latino, don't have representatives in elected office or leaders holding their banner. Not surprisingly, not much is done for the voiceless ones. There are fewer voices speaking up for them, as the civil rights leadership like the trade union officialdom act as partners with the Democratic Party.

This is more so than ever under the first African American president. When a community group like ACORN that aggressively defends the poor comes under attack, it has few allies in the civil rights or labor movements. Or worse, it is thrown under the bus. The NAACP accepted a racist smear campaign by the far right against longtime rural activist Shirley Sherrod before hearing her side of the story.

ACORN never had the opportunity to defend itself. The Obama administration and liberal elected officials still have not apologized for their dirty complicity in the destruction of ACORN.

The October 2 Rally in DC

The October 2, 2010 March on Washington "One Nation Working Together" rally, organized by the NAACP and other civil rights organizations as well as the AFL-CIO and some 400 progressive groups, brought together a major cross section of the U.S. population — Black, Latino, Asian, white, young and old, unions, civil rights groups, women's rights, gay and lesbian groups and many more — but did not focus on the realities of the working poor.

Leaders of the rally mainly talked about the suffering of the "middle class" and the attacks of the far right. "We are together. This march is about the power to the people," said Ed Schultz, host of "The Ed Show" on MSNBC. "It is about the people standing up to the corporations. Are you ready to fight

back?"

Speaking in front of the National Mall, Schultz blamed Republicans for shipping jobs overseas and curtailing freedoms. He borrowed some of conservative commentator Glenn Beck's rhetoric and vowed to "take back our country." "This is a defining moment in America. Are you American?" Schultz told the raucous crowd. "This is no time to back down. This is time to fight for America."

Schultz like other liberals agreed with vice-president Joe Biden that "the base needs to stop whining," get behind the administration and get out the vote. If not, it will be their fault if the Republicans win a majority in Congress and stop Obama's policies.

No mention was made by these "leaders" why left liberals are upset with Obama — his war policies, his retreats from attacks by Big Oil and Big Business, the Wall Street bailout. The attacks by the right go further for ideological reasons, even though Obama's policies represent right-of-center liberalism.

The Voiceless Poor

The working poor are potentially a powerful social group — and voting bloc — if organized. In 2009 (latest available data) the Census Bureau reports that one in seven (14.3% or 43.6 million people) Americans live in poverty. This is the highest number since 1994. In 2008 the number was 13.2% or 39.89 million people.

Poverty numbers by group are devastating for minorities. Some 25.8% of Blacks live in poverty. For Latinos the numbers are 25.3%, for whites 9.4%. Child poverty rose to 20.7%.

The Bureau's poverty line uses an income of less than \$21,954 for a family of four. In what major city can a family of four live with that limited income? Food stamps are essential, and families wait each month for that government program to buy food or else resort to food banks.

The so-called Affordable Health reform (Obama's main accomplishment) did not reduce premiums or other costs paid to the parasitic insurance industry. While some positive changes were made (elimination of pre-existing condition exclusion), for the most part the working poor can't afford health insurance any more today than yesterday.

Those without health insurance rose in 2009 to 16.7%, or 50.7 million people. Mississippi has the highest percentage without insurance at 23.1%. The largest ethnic groups without insurance are African Americans and Latinos.

Project Vote

Other data show that the conservative hard core base is likely smaller than the African American community alone.

Project Vote, a nonprofit organization, did a poll showing that Tea Party sympathizers constitute 29% of 2008 voters, while Black voters, those under 30 and those making less than \$30,000 a year together make up 32% of potential voters.

On nearly every issue, particularly the economy, young, Black and low-income voters views are the inverse of the Tea Party. Blacks believe by strong majorities that the government should help homeowners facing foreclosure, while just 13% of Tea Party faithful do.

The same is true on issues of health care and the national economy. Poor Blacks think the economy is getting better while whites in the Tea Party don't. It is obvious that living for decades with fewer

job and educational opportunities than whites hasn't changed Black people's belief that the gains won by civil rights, and the election of an African-American president, represent progress that will eventually benefit them.

A majority of white Tea Party faithful, on the other hand, see a Black president, whom many call a "Muslim" and a foreigner by birth, taking away "their" America. Many poor as well as better-off white workers believe that affirmative action and equality are why they have fewer jobs and opportunities. The "white skin" privileges based on historical and institutional discrimination are still taken for granted.

The fundamental legal changes won by the civil rights movement are seen as a blow to "their" rights and privileges. The contradiction of real social progress but anxiety and fear among many whites is why there is a racial, and for the extreme right, racist element to the Tea Party movement.

The fact that a few Black and Latino faces are trotted out to speak at rallies only emphasizes the contradiction of legal change and racial undertones. Underneath much of the Tea Party, conservatism and hatred of Obama is clearly fuelled by race.

Poor Are Unrepresented

African Americans and Latinos have lived with double digit unemployment and underemployment for decades. That's the norm for these communities, not the exception as it is for most whites.

Today better-off educated workers — whites and middle-class minorities — have lost their jobs and homes. These individuals never expected to suffer jobs losses for an extended period of time. They have always viewed the problems of the poor as not their problem. The philosophy of "me, myself and I" is deeply rooted in this social layer.

The poor— working or longterm unemployed — on the other hand, have lived it for a lifetime. They are the ones who ran out of unemployment, if they held a job long enough to collect benefits. They are the ones living on food stamps and without much hope. They have just a high school education (or are dropouts) and limited job opportunities.

Neither the civil rights groups nor unions speak up for this large group. The NAACP and civil rights leadership refuse to organize poor people's marches as Martin Luther King did. The poor are invisible to those seeking votes. No wonder the far right is even more aggressive on racial issues than they were under Bill Clinton or George Bush. How ironic that the right can play the "race card" with such a free hand!

Class Warfare Against Poor

Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor under Bill Clinton and a professor at the University of California-Berkeley, recently observed: "We have got to address this inequality, or it will derail the economy." Reich and other liberal economists point to the spectacular growth of the income of the top one percent as morally wrong and potentially socially disruptive.

Wall Street bonuses are growing again as real wages (i.e. adjusted for inflation) fall below what they were 30 years ago. The latest statistics show that the top one percent share of total income is at its highest level since 1928 when that powerful group got 23.94% of the pie. Today it is 23.5% — and they want more as advocates for the rich demand permanent tax cuts and the unrestricted ability to transfer wealth to tax havens abroad.

What's most striking is that the poor and working class — so far — accept their fate with resignation

or with false hope in the Tea Party right, and without much push back. There are no marches on Wall Street or pickets outside the homes of the Forbes billionaires' list. There are no tent cities and few militant actions.

After the big oil spill in the Gulf, there was a lot of anger at BP — but no calls in the South for nationalization of BP. Most of the anger became directed at the alleged “socialist” politics of Obama and anyone who believes government can play a positive role. In fact the far right defends BP and advocates less regulation.

The failure of the civil rights and labor leaderships to recognize that the future depends on aligning with the most oppressed and exploited workers — the working poor — gives the stage to the far right and lets Wall Street off the hook. There is class warfare by the rich and far right against the working class and poor.

The failures of the Obama administration to stand up to Wall Street and the right are no surprise. Democratic White Houses like Republican White Houses have always defended the interests of the ruling class.

The bigger problem is the failure of the labor and civil rights groups to mobilize and push the government and corporations to pay a price for the class warfare on the poor. Their natural bases are poor people and unionized workers, not the middle class professionals.

The defense of the working poor is key to defending the rights and interests of all working people. It's time that their voices be heard and take center stage of politics.

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P.S.

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