COMMONWEAL

$2.00 December 15, 1995

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WHAT FARRAKHAN LEFT OUT

Labor solidarity or racial separatism?

Leaders of organized labor were conspicuously absent from last October's Million Man March. Louis Farrakhan's conservative rhetoric of economic individualism and racial separatism doesn't square with the labor movement's message of class solidarity and racial cooperation. Undoubtedly, however, a significant number of the marchers were union members: Twenty-six percent of black men are unionists.

Beginning with the Depression, civil rights leaders—including A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesse Jackson—have recognized that unions and African-Americans share a common agenda. In their view, appeals to racial pride, without a larger vision of economic justice that cuts across racial divisions, are a dead end. Randolph, the founder of the first black trade union (the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters), mobilized civil rights activists during World War II to push the federal government to integrate defense plants and the army. The 1963 March on Washington—famous for King's "I Have a Dream" speech—was Randolph's idea. The labor movement, especially the United Auto Workers, played a key role in organizing and funding the march, and in exerting pressure to enact the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. When King was assassinated in 1968, he was in Memphis to lead a demonstration of predominantly black sanitation workers who were on strike. Jesse Jackson has spent decades walking picket lines and preaching the union gospel of class solidarity among black, white, and Latino workers.

Union strength reached its peak (at 35 percent of the work force) in the United States in the mid-1950s. Unions enabled American workers, especially blue-collar workers, to share in the postwar prosperity and to join the middle class. Union pay scales boosted the wages of nonunion workers as well. Today, unionized workers continue to have higher wages and better benefits than their nonunion counterparts.

But it was not until the civil rights movement of the 1960s that black Americans began to gain their fair slice of these postwar economic gains. With organized labor finally becoming an ally, the civil rights crusade helped many black Americans move into the economic mainstream. They gained access to good-paying jobs—in factories, government, and the professions—that had previously been off-limits. In unionized firms, the wage gap between black and white workers narrowed significantly. Not so for the gap between union and nonunion workers. According to the Economic Policy Institute, unionized black males earn 19 percent more than blacks in comparable nonunion jobs.

According to Farrakhan, the road to black success is though entrepreneurship: by blacks owning businesses and keeping economic resources in the African-American community. This goal resonates with the American Dream, but it is a far cry from economic reality. Small businesses (including those owned by the Nation of Islam) are difficult to sustain and have a high failure rate. Most blacks, like most whites and Latinos, are wage earners, and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. And those who have joined or formed unions have better wages, working conditions, and benefits than those who have not.

At the Million Man March, Farrakhan preached personal atonement, up-by-the-bootstraps self-improvement, and a "cooperative effort" to rebuild the inner cities by bringing "government and corporate America" into an "alliance with

black organizational, religious, civic, political, and fraternal leaders." Yet tragically absent from his litany was the institution that has played perhaps the largest role in improving the economic condition of black Americans: unions.

While appeals to self-help and racial pride may resonate with African-Americans in our nation's current political climate, they don't address the fundamental problems now facing the black community. To a significant degree, those problems are symptoms of economic distress. Inner-city black America has been especially hard hit by today's harsh economic trends, including the widening gap between rich and poor, corporate downsizing and layoffs, an increase in temporary and part-time work, and the export of decent inner-city jobs overseas.

The erosion of America's labor movement is a chief reason for the nation's declining wages and living standards and the nation's widening economic disparities. Today, union members account for only 16 percent of the American work force, the lowest percentage since the Depression. Some of that decline is the result of a shift from the nation's once-strong manufacturing sector to a service-oriented economy; some is due to the anti-union policies and appointments of the Reagan and Bush administrations; but some of it is the result of labor's own failure to organize new workers and new types of workplaces.

Soon after his election in October, the AFL-CIO's new president, John Sweeney, announced a different sort of self-help message: "I am here to tell you that the most important thing we can do—starting right now, today—is to organize every working woman and man who needs a better deal and a new voice." Sweeney wants to rekindle a spirit of militant unionism, focusing in part on sectors now composed disproportionally of minorities, women, and immigrants. His own union, the Service Employees International, has been one of labor's few success stories during the past decade, doubling its membership to 1.1 million by merging with other unions and by organizing janitors, nursing-home workers, clerical workers, and other low-wage workers.

The unions that have made the most headway in recruiting new members in recent years have drawn on themes and tactics from civil rights crusades and grassroots organizing campaigns. The most successful organizing drives have allied unions with church and community groups, such as ACORN and the Industrial Areas Foundation, and have recruited organizers from civil rights, neighborhood improvement, and women's rights groups. Since 1980, according to labor expert Kate Bronfenbrenner of Cornell University, it is workplaces with a higher percentage of minority workers that are more likely to win union elections.

Sweeney has promised to mobilize a wave of union organizing drives, and to recruit a new generation of organizers, especially minority activists. His goal is to expand not only the number of union members, but to increase labor's political clout by training the rank-and-file as campaign workers. A key component of the strategy is to expand voter registration and turnout among union members, the poor, and minorities.

Most unions, including those with growing minority membership, have been led by white males. This is now beginning to change as well. The recent AFL-CIO convention in New York was noteworthy for the large number of black and Latino delegates and for the fact that the convention voted to expand the AFL-CIO's executive council to increase minority and female representation. As a result, the number of minorities on the board rose from four out of thirty-five (11 percent) to eleven out of fifty-four (20 percent). Under Sweeney, labor's political agenda now looks remarkably similar to those of most progressive African-American organizations. It calls for a new wave of job-creating public investment in the nation's crumbling infrastructure, increasing the minimum wage, protecting social programs, passing national health insurance, expansion of job-training programs, and stronger enforcement of workplace safety regulations and antidiscrimination laws.

In the past two decades, neither organized labor nor the traditional civil rights establishment has had the political clout to secure many victories. But thanks to Sweeney's victory and the Million Man March, there is new excitement among both union and African-American activists. Both have a stake in expanding political participation among the bottom half of the electorate. To do so, they need to link their organizing activities and to enunciate a compelling vision of racial and economic justice. But the question remains whether a philosophy of racial separatism and self-advancement or a vision of worker solidarity and racial integration will prevail.

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