

Workers Unite
Sunday, September 3, 2023
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavely

I began my years of ministry in 1984 at a little two-point United Methodist charge in the Anthracite District of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church. The churches I served were in Weatherly and Beaver Meadows, Pennsylvania. I soon learned that Beaver Meadows was a Catholic town and Weatherly was a Protestant town, a mixed marriage meant a Catholic and Protestant were marrying and that there were multiple stories of grandmas sneaking babies to be baptized at the “right” church.

What I only learned later after being given a book on the coal mining history of the area was that when the German and English miners came together and began to demand better wages and safer working conditions the mine owners began to recruit workers from Italy and Central Europe who were desperate for the wages as offered and weren’t going to risk complaining about the working conditions. The Germans and English were Protestant. The Italians, Poles and Slavs were Catholic.

The mine owners set out to divide their labor force, and they succeeded. Wages were kept low, and safer but more expensive working conditions were not put in place.

One of my own maternal great grandfathers worked in the Pennsylvania mines as a breaker boy separating impurities from the coal by hand. The family lore is that he eventually got involved in trying to unionize the coal miners, which is the reason why my mother took my brother and sister and me to see our first R-rated movie. It was “The Molly Maguires,” about nineteenth century Irish Pennsylvania coal miners who fought the oppressive mine owners.

It was a bit odd, because my mother was hardly pro-union. My socialist great grandfather had named my grandfather Ben Marx Hower after Karl Marx, but my grandfather, whose views my mother followed, was a quite ardent capitalist who, if asked what the M. in Ben M. Hower stood for, would tell you, “Mark.”

But it was that eighteenth century economist, sometimes called “The Father of Capitalism,” Adam Smith who said, “Our merchants and masters complain much of the bad effects of high wages in raising the price and lessening the sale of goods. They say nothing concerning the bad effects of high profits. They are silent with regard to the pernicious effects of their own gains. They complain only of those of other people.”

There is a long history of the master and merchant class dividing the workers in order to keep the profits rolling in. Dorothy Roberts in an essay titled “Race” in [The 1619 Project](#) writes, “In the early days of colonial America, the vast majority of people compelled to work for landowners were vagrant children, convicts, and indentured laborers imported from Europe. The wealthy settlers who benefited from their free labor did not at first distinguish between the status of European, African, and Indigenous servants. But as the slave trade mushroomed, Africans began to be subjected to a distinct kind of servitude: they

alone were considered the actual property of their enslavers.” To keep people being treated as property those wealthy landowners needed to coopt the help of their white laborers. Nikole Hannah-Jones in her essay “Democracy” in [The 1619 Project](#) writes that “Racist justifications for slavery gained ground during the mid-nineteenth century. The majority of the Supreme Court enshrined this thinking in the law in its 1857 Dred Scott decision, declaring that Black people, whether enslaved or free, came from a ‘slave’ race.” Divide and conquer. Blacks are a different race. If you are white, you should help keep them in “their place.”

This racializing of the work force may have originally benefitted owners of enslaved blacks, but it kept workers nicely divided well into the twentieth century. Matthew Desmond in his essay “Capitalism” in [The 1619 Project](#) writes, “Slavery and the racism it nourished, also played a decisive role in weakening the American labor movement. Capitalists leveraged slavery and its racial legacy to divide workers- free from unfree, white from Black- diluting their collective power. Instead of resisting this strategy white-led unions embraced it until it was too late, undercutting their movement and creating conditions for worker exploitation and inequality that exist to this day...By upholding racial segregation within their unions, white workers made their fears of being undercut by Black labor a foregone conclusion. Closing the door on Black people created a pool of available and desperate men and women who could be used to break strikes and quell unrest...To Black workers, strikebreaking was a means to gain a foothold in the growing industrial economy and to secure opportunities long denied them. Black leaders even encouraged strikebreaking and began promoting Black workers as safe investments for industrialists.”

Though many blacks eventually found employment in industry many remained in agricultural and domestic work. Of these workers, David Stoesz writes in his paper, “The Excluded: An Estimate of the Consequences of Denying Social Security to Agricultural and Domestic Workers.” “Conveniently elided, then, was the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers from the original provisions of Social Security, occupational groups that were disproportionately minorities of color. For divergent reasons— racial politics or administrative efficiency—more than 15 million of American workers, almost one third of the labor force, were denied a public pension, effectively consigned to working for any wage available until they were no longer able,” [The Excluded: An Estimate of the Consequences of Denying Social Security to Agricultural and Domestic Workers \(wustl.edu\)](#).

African Americans still work in agriculture and domestic work, but employers have found ways to divide again. Many years ago, I was walking down a city street with a black man who upon seeing a Latino man washing down the pavement in front of a hotel commented rather bitterly that the Latino had taken that job from a black man. Divide the workers and profit.

To turn to agriculture, according to FarmWorker Justice, “Many agricultural employers engage in illegal or deficient labor practices. The resulting labor force turnover means that more than half of the approximately 2.4 million farmworkers are undocumented and marginalized,” [Immigration and Labor – Farmworker Justice](#). But as the video we saw earlier on the use of immigrant child labor by too many employers shows, new immigrants continue to be used by employers to undercut the demands of other employees. And it works. Just as in Weatherly and Beaver Meadows the miners blamed the new recruits and not their employers, the same continues to be so today. And as throughout history, the class that Adam Smith called merchants and masters promote that other blaming. It helps their bottom line.

Which brings me to this sermon's title, "Workers Unite." The American architect Frank Lloyd Wright who was born into a Unitarian family and identified as a Universalist throughout his life ([Frank Lloyd Wright's Unitarian Universalist churches | UU World Magazine](#)) said, "If capitalism is fair then unionism must be. If (people) have a right to capitalize their ideas and the resources of their country, then that implies the right of (people) to capitalize their labor."

In February of this year Greg Rosalky of NPR's Planet Money said, "Last year, labor unions in America looked like they were turning a corner. Employees at more than 250 Starbucks stores voted to unionize. Workers at Amazon warehouses, Trader Joe's, and REI were joining the fight. Grad students. Uber and Lyft drivers. Even the knights, queens, and squires at Medieval Times were jousting to join a union.

"Headline writers began declaring things like, 'Employees everywhere are organizing' and that the United States was seeing a 'union boom.' In September, the White House asserted 'Organized labor appears to be having a moment.'

"However, the Bureau of Labor Statistics recently released its union data for 2022. And their data shows that — far from a resurgence — the share of American workers in a union has continued to decline. Last year, the union membership rate fell by 0.2 percentage points to 10.1% — the lowest on record. This was the second year in a row that the union rate fell. Only one in ten American workers is now in a union, down from nearly one in three workers during the heyday of unions back in the 1950s," [You may have heard of the 'union boom.' The numbers tell a different story : Planet Money : NPR.](#)

I belong to the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association which in some ways acts as a union, but we are a very small group of workers. When I was working for Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice I often saw members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) at rallies and demonstrations. That is a large union. Their website says that they are, "a union of about 2 million diverse members in healthcare, the public sector and property services who believe in and fight for our Vision for a Just Society: where all workers are valued and all people respected—no matter where we come from or what color we are; where all families and communities can thrive; and where we leave a better and more equitable world for generations to come," [SEIU Homepage - Service Employees International Union \(SEIU\) – Fighting for Unions for All so every worker can bargain for a better life.](#) Workers united. Both UUCLC and TriUU have had as a forum speaker Jeannie Economos of The Farmworker Association of Florida. Their webpage says, "The Farmworker Association of Florida's long-standing mission is to build power among farmworker and rural low-income communities, to respond to and gain control over the social, political, economic, workplace, health, and environmental justice issues that impact their lives," [About Us - The Farmworker Association of Florida, Inc. \(floridafarmworkers.org\).](#) Workers united.

"If capitalism is fair then unionism must be. If (people) have a right to capitalize their ideas and the resources of their country, then that implies the right of (people) to capitalize their labor." But it is a hard job to capitalize one's labor alone or even in a group divided. I know "Workers of the World, Unite" is a slogan from [The Communist Manifesto](#) and was the motto of the Soviet Union. Let me publicly denounce Leninism and Stalinism. But if people capitalizing their labor together is socialism, then call me a socialist. Workers together can create a more just society than workers divided. Workers Unite.

UU minister the Rev. Dr. David Breeden said, "My father was one of thirteen children. Of that group, three eventually escaped poverty. How did three escape? My father was able to join a labor union. And

two of my aunts married men who were able to join labor unions,” [Putting "Labor" Back in Labor Day | WorshipWeb | UUA.org](#).

I end with a quote from twentieth century American civil rights activist the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,” I look forward confidently to the day when all who work for a living will be one with no thought to their separateness as (Blacks), Jews, Italians or any other distinctions. This will be the day when we bring into full realization the American dream—a dream yet unfulfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where (people) will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a land where (people) will not argue that the color of a (person’s) skin determines the content of his character; a dream of a nation where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone, but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity; the dream of a country where every (person) will respect the dignity and worth of the human personality. That is the dream..., [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on Labor | American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees \(AFSCME\)](#).