



Above: Bayard Rustin, the architect of the March on Washington, joins Albert Shanker, president of New York City's United Federation of Teachers, for a rally in support of paraprofessionals in 1970.

violated. By 1906, editorials in the *Teamsters'* magazine were making impassioned pleas for all local unions, but especially those in the South, to organize African American workers. The union supported the work of King and provided money and supplies to many civil rights groups, including more than 700 families living in "Freedom Village," who faced retribution for registering to vote in 1960.¹¹ And, few Americans today know of Viola Liuzzo, a civil rights activist and the wife of a Teamster business agent; Liuzzo was shot and killed on March 25, 1965, by Ku Klux Klansmen while driving a Selma marcher home. King, Teamster leaders (including Teamster General President James R. Hoffa, who offered a \$5,000 reward for the capture and conviction of those who murdered Liuzzo),¹² and other labor and civil rights leaders attended her funeral.¹³

Another example of union support for the civil rights movement: in 1960, when the Woolworth store sit-ins began in the South, the New York Central Labor Council organized picketing at the Woolworth

stores in New York City. Such unions as the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union contributed upward of 800 picketers per day.¹⁴

There are many more examples of union participation in the area of civil rights. For instance, the American Federation of Teachers and its locals supported the civil rights movement in many ways, including by filing an amicus brief in support of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, by actively supporting the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and by giving King more than \$40,000 worth of station wagons to be used in the voter registration drive in Selma, Alabama. In 1963, AFL-

CIO President George Meany paid \$160,000 in bail to release King and 2,000 protesters being held in a Birmingham jail.

Other omissions reveal selective bias quite clearly. One glaring example: King was murdered in Memphis in 1968 while he was aiding a unionization effort of black Memphis sanitation workers under the auspices of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference made the Memphis struggle a focal point of its Southern cities organization effort. King believed that unionization was a key part of the struggle for civil rights. Yet, while the textbooks mention the reason why King was in Memphis, none mentions the specific union involved in the strike—clearly a central actor—by name. Worse, not one mentions King's strong belief that labor rights and civil rights were inextricably linked.

In 1961, King spoke to the AFL-CIO on the shared values of the organized labor and civil rights movements. This speech should be included in all U.S. history textbooks. In the speech, King declared:¹⁵

Negroes in the United States read the history of labor and find it mirrors their own experience. We are confronted by powerful forces telling us to rely on the goodwill and understanding of

those who profit by exploiting us. They deplore our discontent, they resent our will to organize, so that we may guarantee that humanity will prevail and equality will be exacted. They are shocked that action organizations, sit-ins, civil disobedience and protests are becoming our everyday tools, just as strikes, demonstrations and union organization became yours to insure that bargaining power genuinely existed on both sides of the table.

We want to rely upon the goodwill of those who oppose us. Indeed, we have brought forward the method of nonviolence to give an example of unilateral goodwill in an effort to evoke it in those who have not yet felt it in their hearts. But we know that if we are not simultaneously organizing our strength we will have no means to move forward. If we do not advance, the crushing burden of centuries of neglect and economic deprivation will destroy our will, our spirits and our hope. In this way, labor's historic tradition of moving forward to create vital people as consumers and citizens has become our own tradition, and for the same reasons.

Finally, there is no mention in the textbooks of labor's role in supporting the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.¹⁶ In short, the picture painted by U.S. history textbooks simply airbrushes labor out of this vital historical period and, in the process, paints an incomplete picture of both the labor and civil rights movements. □

Endnotes

1. As Wade Henderson, president and CEO of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, put it in congressional testimony: "Although many unions attempted to defy workplace racial hierarchies, others acquiesced and focused primarily on organizing white workers, while either neglecting African Americans or relegating them to the worst job classifications. Notably, the United Auto Workers (UAW) stood bravely athwart some of its own members in demanding equal treatment of African-American workers within Detroit's auto plants." See Wade Henderson, "A Strong Labor Movement Is Critical to the Continuing Advancement of Civil Rights in Our Nation" (testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, March 10, 2009).
2. For example, the American Railway Union, which was at the center of the 1894 Pullman strike, did not admit black railway workers. See Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001). See also James Gilbert Cassidy, "African Americans and the American Labor Movement," *Prologue* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1997).
3. For more on the American League of Colored Laborers, see "American League of Colored Laborers (1850-?)," BlackPast.org, www.blackpast.org/?q=aah/american-league-colored-laborers-1850.
4. For a biography of A. Philip Randolph, see "Gentle Warrior: A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979)," A. Philip Randolph Institute, www.apri.org/html/d/sp/1/225/pid/225.
5. See William P. Jones, "Black Workers, Organized Labor, and the Struggle for Civil Rights," *Left History* 8, no. 2 (2003), 145-154.
6. For a biography of E. D. Nixon, see "E. D. Nixon," *Encyclopedia of Alabama* online, www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-1355.

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- For details on Tennessee's new law, see <http://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/Default.aspx?BillNumber=HB0368>; for details on Louisiana's law, see "Bulletin 741—Louisiana Handbook for School Administrators," published by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, at www.doa.louisiana.gov/osr/lac/28v115/28v115.doc. Section 2304 stipulates how the Science Education Act is to be administered by school administrators and teachers at the parish and local levels.
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Labor's Untold Story

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- See Joseph Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation: Conflicts over American History Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003).
- During the strike, corporate and police brutality against the strikers led Michigan Governor Frank Murphy to send in the National Guard, not to attack strikers or to evict them from the GM plant they had occupied (ways in which the National Guard was often used against strikers), but rather to protect them, both from the police, who used tear gas against the strikers, and from corporate strikebreakers.
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- Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).
- For example, Jon Bekken's 1994 analysis of journalism curricula found unions to be neglected or unrepresented. See Jon Bekken, "The Portrayal of Labor in Reporting Textbooks: Critical Absences, Hostile Voices" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Atlanta, GA, August 10–13, 1994), www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED375414.pdf.
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- See Appleby et al., *The American Vision*, 435; and Lapsansky-Werner et al., *United States History*, 558.
- See Danzer et al., *The Americans*, 708–709.
- From the proclamation, printed in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, February 18, 1834. See also, Thomas Dublin, "Women, Work, and Protest in the Early Lowell Mills: The Oppressing Hand of Avarice Would Enslave Us," *Labor History* 16 (1975): 99–116, www.invention.smithsonian.org/centerpieces/whole_cloth/u2ei/u2materials/dublin.html. As Dublin notes, "At several points in the proclamation the women drew on their Yankee heritage. Connecting their turn-out with the efforts of their 'Patriotic Ancestors' to secure independence from England, they interpreted the

wage cuts as an effort to 'enslave' them—to deprive them of the independent status as 'daughters of freemen.'" Dublin points out that this proclamation (and, we believe, many of the group's other writings) makes clear that the women saw their right to band together to fight for better pay and working conditions as a natural outgrowth of the rights defended by their ancestors in the American Revolution and enshrined in the Constitution.

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- For examples, see the international labor activism website LabourStart at www.laborstart.org.
- For a chart of union membership rates historically, in the United States and several other countries, see Gerald Friedman, "Labor Unions in the United States," *EH.Net Encyclopedia of Economic and Business History*, ed. Robert Whaples, March 16, 2008, www.eh.net/encyclopedia/article/friedman.unions.us.

Distorting the Record

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- For more on Bayard Rustin's life and the new award-winning documentary *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin*, see www.rustin.org.
- For an analysis of civil rights unionism and the forces that shaped it, see Michael Honey, "A Dream Deferred," *The Nation*, May 3, 2004. Honey, a professor at the University of Washington, writes: "It is crucial to remember that *Brown* was as much the product as the precipitator of mass movements. Yes, the decision resulted from the incredibly hard-working and astute battle led by Charles Houston, Thurgood Marshall and others in the NAACP. But it also resulted from mass movements and a vast shift in status among poor and working-class African-Americans, millions of whom moved out of rural areas and into cities and mass-production industries in the 1930s and '40s. They created an expanding membership base for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the NAACP and an American left that challenged segregation at every level. Domestic workers, sharecroppers, day laborers, factory workers and other poor people, especially the women among them, organized economic boycotts, picket lines, marches, sit-ins, strikes, church and community groups, unions, consumer cooperatives and mass meetings. Their role as workers, soldiers and activists in the fight against white supremacy at home and fascism abroad created vast social changes that set the stage for *Brown*. As one example, in the Deep South city of Memphis, African-Americans, who had been organizing unions since after the Civil War, provided the main support that made the rise of the CIO possible, at a time when supporting a union could cost one's life. The purge of the interracial left from the CIO during the cold war undermined civil rights unionism, yet a number of black industrial unionists continued to challenge white supremacy in the 1950s and '60s. Union wages also made it more possible to send children to college, and some of those students led sit-ins and demonstrations against Jim Crow."
- For a more detailed account of the UAW's history in supporting civil rights, see "UAW History," United Auto Workers, www.uaw.org/page/uaw-history.
- Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945–1968* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 176.
- For more on the Teamsters' support of civil rights, see "Teamsters and Civil Rights," International Brotherhood of Teamsters, www.teamster.org/history/teamster-history/civil-rights. See also www.teamster.org/content/teamsters-honor-black-history-month.
- See "This Day in History," International Brotherhood of Teamsters, www.teamstermagazine.com/day-history.
- An all-white jury acquitted the men accused in Viola Liuzzo's slaying. For more on Liuzzo, see "Civil Rights Martyr Viola Liuzzo," International Brotherhood of Teamsters, March 11, 2010, www.teamster.org/content/civil-rights-martyr-viola-liuzzo.
- Peter B. Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 17.
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