

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
THE LABOR COMMISSION
**ON RACIAL AND
ECONOMIC JUSTICE**

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The Labor Commission On Racial And Economic Justice

In February 2015, the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO noted that “America’s legacy of racism and racial injustice has been and continues to be a fundamental obstacle to workers’ efforts to act together to build better lives for all of us...[I]t is time for a frank and thoughtful discussion on racial inequality and its economic impact—starting first in the house of labor.”

The AFL-CIO established a Labor Commission on Racial and Economic Justice, comprised of 17 leaders of 13 international unions and supported by an Advisory Council of 14 labor and academic experts on race relations. Its work was driven by three questions:

- How can we help our affiliates and local labor leaders understand and better respond to the concerns, needs and aspirations of union members of color?
- How can we more effectively integrate racial justice issues into our ongoing political and policy work at the state and local levels, and in our long-term strategies for achieving a fairer and more inclusive America?
- What more can we do to ensure we have a diverse set of labor leaders who are forward-looking, inclusive, and reflect the working class of the future?

The Labor Commission on Racial and Economic Justice held six hearings in six cities between the fall of 2015 and spring of 2016. The recommendations below stem from the Commission’s hearings and discussions.

1. Build solidarity and empathy by engaging union leaders and members in a conversation on how race has been used to weaken labor unity, limit the growth of the labor movement, and damage efforts to advance economic reforms that benefit all working people.

Talking about racial bias and the impact of racial politics can be challenging, but without an understanding of the intersection between class and race, we are vulnerable to the divisive tactics of corporations and unscrupulous politicians. The Commission recommends that:

1.a. All AFL-CIO affiliates incorporate training on race, racial bias, and its impact on labor solidarity into ongoing internal union training programs, if they have not already done so.

1.b. All state federations and Central Labor Councils (CLCs) in large metropolitan areas will conduct such trainings by the end of 2017.

1.c. The commission recommends that affiliates, state federations and large CLCs schedule popular education trainings on three topics: Rewriting the Economic Rules, Criminal Justice Reform and Immigration. These courses include facilitated discussions of how institutional and racial bias have shaped policy choices that harm working people and undermine labor solidarity.

1.d. State Federations and large CLCs create a local version of the Labor Commission, using external professional facilitators, after consulting with AFL-CIO staff to understand the kind of preparation required. Sensitive racial conversations require experienced facilitators who are perceived by all participants as neutral mediators.

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2. To build a more “diverse and inclusive labor movement,” we must integrate the issues and concerns of members and workers of color into labor’s political and policy work at every level. (Resolution 20, 2013 Convention.)

Labor is the largest self-funded, membership-based organization in the United States, with a democratically elected leadership that champions an independent progressive economic agenda for the nation. As we build “a broader, stronger labor movement for the future,” it is imperative that our goals include racial equity demands.

2.a. The commission urges AFL-CIO affiliates, state federations and CLCs to build and deepen long-term partnerships with independent people of color groups to maximize our collective power in state and local politics.

2.b. The commission recommends that programs that encourage and train union members of color, women and community allies to run for public office be made available in more places, that issues of concern to workers of color are included on COPE and other political surveys and that all potential candidates understand the union endorsement process.

2.c. The commission recommends that AFL-CIO constituency groups are fully integrated into all the activities in Section 2, and that each state federation and CLC includes a designated slot on its executive board for a representative of a constituency group.

2.d. The commission recognizes that our affiliates use collective bargaining to address the interests and concerns of the members of their bargaining units, and recommends that more affiliates explore ways to simultaneously advance members’ interests and community interests through “bargaining for the common good” and labor-management relations.

2.e. The commission strongly encourages AFL-CIO affiliates, state federations and CLCs to work with public officials and community leaders to encourage public investments in job creation, policies to improve job quality and reforms that ensure people of color have access to the jobs, including expanding access to training programs.

2.f. The Commission recommends that the AFL-CIO, state federations, CLCs and affiliates actively support criminal justice reforms: community policing, sentencing reform, removal of employment obstacles for the formerly incarcerated, restrictions on for-profit prisons and the restoration of voting rights.

Specifically, the Commission recommends that:

- State federations and CLCs urge policy makers to require police officers be properly trained in community policing and de-escalation tactics. In particular, they should encourage local jurisdictions to participate in the Quality Policing Initiative, which promotes reciprocal, professional, accountable and cooperative policing and addresses recruitment, training, community deployment, accountability and advancement issues.
- The AFL-CIO, state federations and CLCs support efforts to reduce mandatory minimum sentencing laws, to support “ban the box” legislation and to restore the rights of the formerly incarcerated.
- The AFL-CIO, affiliates and state federations promote federal, state and local legislation, policies and practices that end for-profit correctional facilities or services.
- Labor unions support efforts to alleviate prison overcrowding by advocating for adequate staffing for correctional institutions.
- The Executive Council and Civil and Human Rights Committee will establish a sub-committee on criminal justice reform to gather and disseminate the work affiliates have been doing on criminal justice.
- AFL-CIO affiliate unions become active partners in My Brother’s Keeper Initiative (MBK), a coordinated philanthropic partnership set up by President Obama to address persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color to ensure that they can reach their full potential.
- When appropriate, CLCs attempt to facilitate constructive communication between local law enforcement and community members.

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3. Work to ensure labor's leadership and decision-making structures reflect the diversity of our members, and all working people.

The labor movement's ability to expand its membership and activist base will depend on having organizers and leaders who look like the people we want to bring into the labor movement. Intentional action will be required to ensure union members of color are integrated into decision-making structures and leadership roles, both elected and appointed. This may require changes in recruitment, hiring and promotion practices and/or the creation of new mentoring and development opportunities. To achieve real progress, the Commission recommends that:

3.a. Every affiliate examines the demographics of working people in each sector in which the affiliate has or wants to organize, and makes every effort to hire organizers and staff who reflect prospective members.

3.b. Each affiliate review internal decision-making structures and governance practices that may limit the access people of color to leadership opportunities and the work to change them:

Develop an internal leadership pipeline within the union to identify promising candidates, and then provide them with leadership training and mentoring;

Ensure a diverse pool of candidates for every staff position—especially those with decision-making authority.

Expand the number of elected leadership positions.

Develop young worker programs to provide opportunities for younger union members of color and women to serve in leadership roles and gain experience and visibility to increase our pool of candidates for elected and appointed leadership.

Engage in intentional succession planning.

Develop clear diversity goals and collect data to measure progress across every part of the organization. Management and staff at all levels of the labor movement are responsible for diversity. The work can neither be tasked to people of color nor housed in civil rights or women's programs.

3.c. The commission recommends that affiliates, state federations and CLCs fully integrate diversity priorities into decisions about resource allocation, political initiatives, legislative proposals and conference planning—over multiple budget cycles.

3.d. We will measure our progress on all three of the recommendations above in an annual report, issued by the AFL-CIO president's office. The president's office will issue a report that outlines participation in racial justice training among members, union leaders and federation staff; advances setting and meeting diversity and leadership goals; and measures progress to develop deep partnerships and strategic campaigns with communities of color. Doing so will allow us to build a stronger, more inclusive labor movement and to win power in municipal, state and national politics.

The recommendations above reflect the concerns we heard from local leaders and rank-and-file union members at the commission hearings. We recognize that every union and every community faces unique challenges. Many AFL-CIO affiliates are already working hard to make their unions more inclusive, responsive and welcoming. The larger report highlights examples of best practices to show that change is not only possible but also is under way. Our goal must be to spread these changes across our entire labor movement.

We need a culture of experimentation and boldness as we create a labor movement for the 21st century. We must be brave enough to share our challenges and generous enough to share our successes. Our country needs us to look to the future, especially now.

All working class people in America are concerned about wage stagnation, the off-shoring of jobs, the cost of healthcare, retirement security and the future their children will face. America's working people come in every hue, religion and gender.

After a bruising presidential campaign—shaped by false news, demeaning rhetoric and oceans of corporate money—our country needs a unified labor movement more than ever. History teaches us that building the power required to improve the lives of working people only happens when working people are united and strong.

Labor solidarity unity is built in the workplace, on the job-site and in the union hall. Real solidarity requires honest conversations, hard listening and the willingness to stand together to fight for each other. Let us begin.