

Race Is About More Than Discrimination

Racial Capitalism, the Settler State, and the Challenges Facing Organized Labor in the United States

BILL FLETCHER JR.

Though almost a cliché, it is worth reminding ourselves that “race” is a sociopolitical construct and not a scientific concept. This, however, does not make it any less real—it is the name for a system of oppression and social control, the origins of which date back at least to the Reconquista in Spain, the invasion of the Western Hemisphere, the slave trade in Africa, and the English subjugation of Ireland in the 1500s.

The construction of “race” and “racism” was the construction of a system of total subjugation that was integral to the development of capitalism. It was never a system of prejudice alone. Various forms of prejudice appear to have been with *homo sapiens* throughout recorded history. But the creation of “race” as ideology and oppression (and later pseudoscience) was necessary as a means of constructing capitalist nation-states and introducing what would later be identified as *class collaboration* in order to ensure the relative permanence of the system.¹

The invasion and subjugation of Ireland introduced a new element in the construction of race that had not taken form with the completion of the Reconquista in Spain. The English subjugation of Ireland turned out to be far more than the capture and absorption of a territory or kingdom, a practice with which humans were familiar since the commencement of class society. It was also different, in important respects, from the European invasion of the Western Hemisphere (which, until 1607, was largely about conquest, enslavement, and annihilation on the part of the Spanish and Portuguese). It was the development of the settler colony and, ultimately, the settler state.

The English totally subjugated the Irish, rendering unlawful their political system, language, and land control. They also began a process of moving in settlers from England, Wales, and Scotland who were given the best land, control of their own weapons, and an overall *privileged status*

BILL FLETCHER JR. is the executive editor of globalafricanworker.com, a former president of TransAfrica Forum, and a longtime leftist trade unionist and writer.

vis-à-vis the indigenous Irish.² Central in the construction of this settler colony was the notion of “race” that the English used not in descriptive terms but as a way of designating allegedly superior populations (English) versus allegedly inferior populations (Irish). The settler state, then, was *racially* constructed from its inception, but was linked to the idea of displacement/expulsion of the indigenous population. This is what made settler colonialism different from other variants of colonialism where the Europeans (or later the United States) occupied territory, frequently ruling through local compradors and agents.

Racial Settler Colonialism in North America

There are several remarkable characteristics of settler colonialism.³ One is the almost constant reference to God – that is, the Creator of all things endowed the settlers with the right to a specific piece of land and, by implication, to remove anyone or anything in the way of settlement. Such references appear time and again, whether one is examining Ireland, British North America, Israel/Palestine, South Africa, or Australia.

Settler colonies that evolve into full settler states exhibit no interest in a *modus vivendi* with the indigenous populations. The indigenous populations are to be removed or eliminated altogether and, in every case, are to be subordinated to the interests of the settler. In some situations, so-called mixed race peoples in a settler state have played a role in social control, but the more effective means of social control over the entire settler colonial capitalist project is the creation of a population – *the mass of the settlers* – who give their allegiance to the larger system.⁴

The racialization embedded in a settler state is regularly reaffirmed through the practice of creating what should be understood as the so-called *legitimate* and *illegitimate* populations. This is a characteristic of racism generally, we should note. But the legitimacy question in a settler state is linked to the fusion of race and settlerism. As one sees in the United States, the critical image for white right-wing populists (fascists and nonfascists) revolves around the very notion of the United States as allegedly a *white republic*. This carries many implications, including some that have direct relevance to organized labor in the country.

It Is Not Just That Organized Labor Began White...

A labor movement, as such, emerged in the 1600s as indentured servants and slaves rose in periodic revolts against the oppression that they experienced at the hands of the colonial elite. This movement took many forms, ranging from open, armed revolts and running away to sabotage and killing one’s “master.” In time, guilds were formed in certain

crafts among free labor and, with the introduction of racial slavery-for-life, joint African/European uprisings largely declined into near nonexistence, a point repeatedly raised by the late Theodore Allen.⁵ That said, slave revolts and slave conspiracies became the cutting edge of the labor movement, broadly defined.

That segment of labor that came to be recognizable as trade unions or labor unions made their appearance in the 1830s, during the time of the so-called Jacksonian Democracy (the period of the presidency of Andrew Jackson). These organizations included both men and women, sometimes segregated, other times together. What they lacked were what we would today call *workers of color*.

While most contemporary scholars and activists would acknowledge the reactionary nature of this exclusion, its broader implications are insufficiently explored.

Jacksonian Democracy represents a decisive period in U.S. history and an equally critical image for major right-wing movements in the United States today. Jackson became the quintessential conservative populist leader speaking out and allegedly representing the “little man,” particularly in the fight against larger elite interests. While Jackson did personify this role and specifically sought to secure a mandate among those “common persons” who could legally vote, this was an era of absolute terror associated with slavery, the westward expansion (aided by increased European migration to the United States), and the continued disenfranchisement of women. Jackson played a major role in opening “new” land for settlers and removing Native Americans from the land to which they were legally entitled (not just morally, but as per treaties with the U.S. government). A supporter of slavery, he reaffirmed the United States as a “white republic.” This was to be a country for whites, which, given so-called Manifest Destiny, would ultimately expand to the Pacific, though that expansion was largely completed after Jackson left office.

The environment of the burgeoning trade union movement was set by the reality of the Jacksonian era. Even the context of the split that hampered organized labor prior to the Civil War was telling. As W. E. B. Du Bois noted in *Black Reconstruction in America*, prior to the Civil War, organized labor in the United States split three ways on the question of slavery.⁶ One segment opposed slavery, another supported it, and a third believed that slavery was not an issue on which organized labor should take a stand.

Critical to the thinking lying behind the positions of opposing and supporting slavery was the matter of workforce competition, that is, would the continuation of slavery represent competition with free labor that would lead to the degradation of the latter, or would the elimination of

slavery bring about the introduction of a new workforce that would be in competition with free labor?

While there were certainly those in the antislavery segment of the movement who opposed slavery for moral and/or political reasons, the framework of *competition* is critical to appreciate. At a general level, the working class is always in competition with itself over limited resources, limited as a result of the nature of capitalism. The competition that is engendered by capitalism results in various responses including but not limited to the formation of worker organization such as trade unions. Nevertheless, as I and many others have raised, the formation of trade unions is grounded on either an *inclusionist* or *exclusionist* framework regarding how the unions view who should be organized into them.⁷

The inclusionist/exclusionist framework is true in all capitalist states. “Race” was an additional element in the competition equation. To quote the famous statement by Karl Marx: “Labour in a white skin can’t emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin.”⁸ The attempt by a segment of organized labor to “emancipate” itself in the absence of unity with other segments of the working class would inevitably fail. Marx’s statement, in that sense, is a truism under all conditions of racist and national oppression. Where a working class is divided along racial or nationality lines, attempts by one segment to go solo inevitably serve the interests of capital, are encouraged by capital, and limit the possibilities for working-class power.

Yet the situation in the United States was not one of a “simple” racial divide. The settler state was founded on an ideology of ownership. The state – the United States – was the state of the white settlers. In the minds of the settlers, it was not just a matter of Africans being the “black race” but that they, along with Native Americans, Mexicans, and Asians, existed in contradiction to the white republic, meaning the settler state. While it was true that, in migrating to the United States, various European nationalities faced intense hostility, within a generation they were absorbed into the racial settler state to the extent to which they adopted and practiced “whiteness.”⁹

Organized labor – based on white-exclusive and later white-dominated, though not necessarily exclusive, trade unions – formed itself as part of the settler state, not in the sense of being an apparatus of the state (except in the sense that Louis Althusser discussed ideological state apparatuses), but in the sense of accepting certain important precepts. The unions took for granted the nature of the settler state and, as such, conceived that the unions were to exist to serve the “legitimate” population, or at least the working class of the legitimate population.

As the trade union movement emerged both prior to and following the Civil War, the acceptance of the racial settler state was part of its DNA. It was

not just a matter of racial prejudice but the identification of populations who were not acceptable for the union movement. It was also represented by the silence of the movement on the objectives of the settler state itself.

There are multiple examples of this challenge. The influx of Chinese labor was met with a very different response than was the influx of Irish and later Italian labor. Despite the hostility that Irish and Italians both encountered on arrival, organized labor was, to a great extent, willing and able to configure itself in such a way ultimately to legitimize these immigrant workers and their descendants. This took very distinct forms. Unions came to be dominated by specific European ethnic groups; local unions of the same parent union might have different ethnic domination as well. Nothing along those lines took place within the mainland United States when it came to Asians within the context of what was understood to be the “official” labor movement. Instead, most of white labor organized actively against Asians generally and Chinese migrants in particular.

Beginning almost immediately after the Civil War, so-called nonwhites either together or separately battled to organize labor organizations, including but not limited to unions. In many cases, such as when African-American workers sought to join the Knights of Labor, they fought to be included in white-majority unions. In other cases, they chose to establish fully independent unions with the possibility of merging with white-majority unions, such as the Japanese Mexican Labor Association in the early twentieth century.

The “official” labor movement, that is, the white-majority or white-exclusive formations, in effect pledged its loyalty to the racial settler state. In time this was treated as *patriotism*.

The official labor movement ignored – at best – the wars against Native Americans and the securing of land for settlers. In some respects, the land question was viewed more from the context of the illusions it presented to the settler-worker rather than from the standpoint of the implication of the genocidal war against the First Nations.¹⁰ Whether in openly white supremacist terms or by omission, the “official” movement situated itself as a movement of white working people in struggle against the white employer class, but joined together by the framework of the white republic against all others.

There are many similarities that one can see in other settler states. In South Africa, for instance, there was the notorious strike in the 1920s where the slogan was “Workers of the world unite and fight for a white South Africa!” The trade union movement that evolved in South Africa, until the successful advent of what came to be known as the independent Black trade union movement in the 1980s, was either exclusively white or had provisions for a very subordinate role for African, Asian, and so-

called colored workers. The South African white trade union movement positioned itself within the colonial and later apartheid framework. A similar, though not identical, role was played by the Histadrut (General Organization of Workers) in, first, the British Mandate of Palestine and, later, in the post-1948 state of Israel.

The framework of the racial settler state helps one understand that the militant economic struggle alone is insufficient to bring about any significant and long-term unity.

Ambivalence About Race and Denial of Settlerism

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) had the distinction of having been the only labor federation to not tolerate racial segregation. The IWW took a strong stand against displays of racism and refused to cave to white racism when it came to organizing workers.

That said, the IWW lacked anything approaching a comprehensive analysis of racism and national oppression in the United States other than to identify it, correctly, as a form of divide and conquer. Within the white-majority labor movement, this was, until the emergence of Communist-led formations in the 1920s and 1930s, the most advanced view.

The larger white-majority labor movement either took an outright white supremacist stand, such as that of the Railroad Brotherhoods, or willingly organized workers of color while rarely tackling the racist divisions within the working class (and the various manifestations of the racial differential in treatment). With the absorption of northern Mexico (1848), the complete subjugation of Native Americans by the 1880s, the implementation of anti-Asian migration statutes (and agreements), and the defeat of “Black” Reconstruction in the South (1876), the white-republic conceptualization fully merged with the framework of “American patriotism.”¹¹ The white republic was the United States and the United States was, at its heart, the white republic. There were at least two ramifications for white-majority organized labor.

First, adoption of U.S. foreign policy became the patriotic duty of the official labor movement. With the partial exception of the Spanish-American War, endorsement of U.S. foreign policy, including armed interventions, support for coups, and so on, became a central component of the majority of official organized labor’s approach. It assumed a form of imperial consciousness, which was the logical extension of the framework of the white republic.

Second, and specific to the functioning of the trade union movement, the movement and its history centered around the activities of white workers, particularly white *male* workers. Thus, while the U.S. working

class was multinational and multiracial, the movement's identity was largely shaped by the assumption that it was a component of the white republic. This meant that the official movement was *inviting in* workers of color rather than *uniting with* workers of color.

Here is a related analogy. In the late 1800s, the baseball system chose to segregate and openly exclude African-American players and Latinos with demonstrable African blood. By the 1930s, the Negro Leagues, set up to organize Black baseball, were well down the road of considering the means to conduct a merger with (white) Major League Baseball (MLB), thereby desegregating and transforming the sport. This was never taken seriously by MLB. Instead, Branch Rickey, of the then Brooklyn Dodgers, chose to desegregate baseball by bringing on Jackie Robinson, a former Negro League player. This was followed by a process, conducted by multiple teams, of raiding the Negro Leagues of their best players. Thus, the MLB was desegregated – a positive move – but on terms dictated by and to the advantage of the white owners of MLB.

To a great extent, official organized labor had a similar approach toward workers of color, including but not limited to Black workers. The fight for desegregation, a critical and necessary battle, largely took place in a context elaborated by official organized labor. It was an absorption into what existed, rather than a transformation of the nature of the movement into something different.

The battle against racist discrimination is not being undervalued in this article. Rather, we are noting that the approach toward such a battle was and is essential to understanding the outcomes or, in the current situation, our objectives. As Michael Goldfield demonstrates in his must-read *The Southern Key: Class, Race & Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s*, there were vastly different approaches toward this fight against racism within the burgeoning Congress of Industrial Organizations.¹² The Steel Workers Organizing Committee – later the United Steel Workers of America – “desegregated” by its willingness to organize all workers into one union, but failed to address the consequences of racist oppression in the workplace. Workers of color, particularly African Americans and Chicanos, were added to the white workers who were willing to organize. Workers of color were frequently more advanced than white workers in their willingness to and interest in organizing unions. Nevertheless, they were regularly deprived of power in the organization and there was an overall lack of a demonstrable commitment by the union directly to attack racist discrimination in the workplace.

Left-led unions, overall, had a much better track record in taking on racist oppression in the working class, as a result of both a more sophisticated analysis but also the active inclusion of activists of color in the

membership and leadership. In general, left-led unions recognized the importance of building alliances with other social movements – including within communities of color – and taking on racist oppression in the workplace.¹³ But even in most left-led unions, there remained a tendency to see the official union movement as the focal point or gravitational center, rather than an instrument in constructing a movement that, even implicitly, was challenging the assumptions of the settler state.

Right-Wing Populism, Organized Labor, and Today's Challenges

The discussion of settler colonialism and the racial settler state is not a matter for the preoccupation of historians alone. It has great relevance to understanding the evolution of social movements in the United States, the obstacles that they have encountered, the profound difficulties in developing an internationalist practice within the U.S. working class, and the rise of the political tendency known as right-wing populism.

Right-wing populism is, as I am fond of saying, the *herpes of capitalism*. It is a virus in the system. It is not alien to capitalism, be it democratic or authoritarian capitalism. As Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons have pointed out, it is a movement that rises as a direct counter to progress and progressive social movements.¹⁴ It is a movement centered around revanchism, revenge by those who believe that they have been displaced by an illegitimate force (usually a particular demographic, such as Jews and migrants).

Right-wing populism as a social force is highly ideological, grounding itself in irrationalism, racism, sexism, and xenophobia.¹⁵ But as mentioned earlier, its critical image is both the founding of the United States and, more importantly, the era of the Jacksonian Democracy. As such, the white-republic conceptualization is central to its notion of the historical origins of the United States as well as the direction the United States should follow into the future.

Right-wing populism represents a special threat to the U.S. working class generally and to the labor movement in particular because of its appeal to “justice,” opposition to elites, and a deep sense of being wronged. As I and others have repeatedly noted, right-wing populism can take and morph the language of the political left in order to advance its own objectives. When it is successful at such an articulation, right-wing populism can appeal to the same working-class base that the political left is attempting to reach, or at least a portion of it.

For these reasons, a historical understanding of the roots of the U.S. labor movement, matters of racial settlerism, and language becomes especially important. And it is around all this that organized labor in the United States has been more than ambivalent. A few examples of the challenges may help.

The right-wing populist current that gravitated to Donald Trump was immediately taken with his reference to “America First.” “America First,” as a slogan, is multilayered. Though first used in the early part of the twentieth century, it is more commonly associated with a right-wing isolationist movement led by the aviator Charles Lindbergh that was soft on European fascism, generally anti-Semitic, and, until December 7, 1941, did all it could to keep the United States out of the Second World War.

“America First” is not isolationist. It is a framework that proposes that the United States not be encumbered by treaties and other obligations. Thus, the United States should be able to do what it wishes, when it wishes. It is a program for unilateralism.¹⁶

“America First” also assumes who is an “American” and who is not. Nowhere in the history of the slogan has there ever been the assumption that the conception of “America” is anything other than the white republic. “America” is certainly not a reference to the hemisphere and is not a reference to all those who reside in the United States.

To the extent to which organized labor has failed to reject its foundational contradiction – or original sin – there are elements of “America First” that can be more than appealing, including protectionism. Also appealing is the suggestion that “America First” means prioritizing so-called natives (Europeans who have not recently immigrated).

Another arena that becomes very complicated for organized labor is foreign policy and the construction of patriotism. To the extent to which white organized labor either supported or was silent on the westward expansion, the annexation of territory, and/or the direct interference in the internal affairs of other countries, it has weakened its claim to anything that approaches international worker solidarity. But tackling this history means running the risk of being challenged as being unpatriotic, if not communist. The right-wing populists can opportunistically challenge corporate America as well as the political class for failing to be patriotic in their abandoning of the U.S. (white) worker. All too often, liberal and progressive forces in organized labor have no response. In some cases, such as the Teamsters in 2000, they can align themselves with right-wing populists who *appear* to share common opponents with organized labor.

In debates around immigration, by way of another example, rarely is there discussion of the conditions from which migrants, particularly those coming from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Asia, face at home and what has driven them to migrate. Specifically, to what extent has U.S. foreign policy contributed to migration? And, as a result, should not the United States be obligated to engage in *repairing* the damage that it created?

Can Labor Break the Paradigm?

Restricting oneself to opposing racist discrimination while ignoring the legacy of the racial settler state presents limitations for organized labor. One can recognize and oppose overt and covert acts of racist discrimination, while at the same time accept many of the assumptions inherent in settlerism.

Take the struggle around the Keystone XL pipeline, or any number of other pipelines. The fact that a union has demonstrated a commitment to organize workers across racial boundaries does not necessarily translate into their holding advanced views on First Nation rights. Thus, unions such as the Laborers International Union of North America could find itself at odds with a broad coalition of environmentalists, landowners, and Native Americans in which tribal rights played a major role.

The example of immigration, noted earlier, contains issues that flow from settlerism and the conception of the white republic. Consider that the United States seized northern Mexico in 1848, thereby splitting a people and not just land. What has often been described as immigration was, for much of the last 172 years, the transit in both directions of migrants seeking work and then returning home. This is a far cry from an invasion but instead is rooted in the construction of the United States.

There is another example that clearly demonstrates the current reality of racial settlerism. The matter of undocumented migration is frequently portrayed as a phenomenon of migrants of color, particularly those from Latin America. Yet undocumented migration has a long history that includes undocumented migration from Europe. In the last fifty years, undocumented migrants from Ireland and Eastern Europe, in particular, have entered the United States *en masse*, but this was rarely described as anything approaching a social crisis. Indeed, Trump's announcement of running for president in 2015 was directly linked to the fear-image that he presented of migrants from Mexico coming to the United States to promote crime. Such imagery has not been offered of European migrants with whom criminal gangs are often associated.

The implication is that the danger presented by migrants is not from migrants, but from *specific* migrants: migrants of color. Those from Europe are not only given a pass but a *ticket* to whiteness.

Organized labor must adopt a different framework that starts with the difficult discussion about U.S. history, not with the aim of creating a sense of guilt among so-called white workers but to lay the foundation for a different domestic and international strategy for workers' rights and justice. This will be a matter of both internal education as well as a shift in the practice of trade unionism. And it will be a shift that will be met with intense resistance, particularly because in the United States we are

actively taught to oppose history and, instead, embrace myth. The myth of the foundation of both the United States and U.S. trade unionism are quite strong and compelling. They just happen to be wrong.

Notes

1. An elaborated argument on this can be found in the work of the late Theodore Allen, particularly in his two-volume work *The Invention of the White Race* (London: Verso, 1994), as well as the late Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
2. The terms *privilege* and *privileged* are not without controversy. In the context of racist and national oppression, they do not suggest or imply wealth and prosperity. They describe a relative differential in treatment between the settler or oppressor group, on the one hand, and the oppressed, subjugated population, on the other. As such, racial and national privileges do not depend on the strength of the economy because they are socially and politically constructed, working themselves into the culture of the oppressed and oppressor nations or peoples. The creation of racial and/or national privilege, as a system, becomes a means to secure the allegiance of the bottom strata of the oppressor society/state with the ruling circles, that is, the lower strata, the laboring classes. The privilege system implies that no matter how badly treated, the lower strata of the oppressor population will not be placed into the same category of the oppressed, "Other" population.
3. There has been excellent work carried out over the years to better understand settler colonialism and settler states. The work of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz will be mentioned here specifically because of the way she has connected the struggle around gun ownership in the United States to whiteness and the settler state. See Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2018).
4. This can mean allegiance to the foreign colonizer, such as the allegiance of the pied noir (European colonists) in Algeria to the French colonial state against Algerian independence, or it can be the allegiance of so-called whites in the United States to what they see as a white republic.
5. There were exceptions, such as the 1741 conspiracy that involved African slaves and Irish indentured servants who were planning a joint revolt. The critical feature here was that the Irish had not yet been declared to be "white."
6. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: A History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1935).
7. Referring to whether there is an effort to limit those eligible for union membership so as to increase the value of those who are positioned to collectively bargain, or whether the objective is to organize and unionize all those who have a common interest vis-à-vis an employer or industry so as to build a wider swath of power.
8. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 414.
9. By "practice whiteness," we mean the extent to which European immigrants participated directly or indirectly in the perpetration of the white supremacist project. This could range from support for slavery to grabbing the lands of Native Americans and Mexicans, to excluding so-called nonwhites from access to rights and resources.
10. Most early Marxists in the United States also fell prey to this orientation, not appreciating the significance of the development of *racial settler states* in North America.
11. Japanese people were not excluded by law but as the result of what was called the Gentleman's Agreement between the United States and imperial Japan.
12. Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Key: Class, Race & Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
13. Two examples being the National Negro Congress (NNC), formed in 1936, and El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Española (the Congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples), both formed with the major influence of the Communist Party and other left forces. Though both organizations had a quasi-ideological connection with the more left-led unions, they also helped other unions. The NNC, for instance, was instrumental in the success of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee and the victory of the United Auto Workers, the latter in their unionizing of Ford workers.
14. Chip Berlet and Matthew N. Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort* (New York: Guilford, 2000).
15. For a deeper look at right-wing populism, I humbly suggest reading, in addition to Berlet and Lyons, Bill Fletcher Jr., "'Stars and Bars': Understanding Right-Wing Populism in the USA," in *Socialist Register 2016*, ed. Leo Panitch and Greg Albo (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015).
16. There is a long history to this unilateralism that can be situated in the approach of the United States toward the First Nations. The attitude of the U.S. government and white settlers toward the Native Americans and the construction (and destruction) of treaties is examined in detail in Suzan Shown Harjo, ed., *Nation to Nation: Treaties between the United States & American Indian Nations* (Washington DC: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Books, 2013).