



Forging unity within the working class: an interview with Michael D. Yates

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[Labor](#) , [Movements](#) , [Protest](#) [Global](#) , [United States](#) [Interview](#) [Featured](#)

In its desperate race to survive its series of crises, capitalism keeps clinging onto its old tool of dividing the working class. But, since commencing its political fight, the working class has uplifted a different call: Workers of the world unite! More than one hundred years ago, the proletariat in Russia trampled over all the divisions among the working class created by capital and achieved a historic victory—the Great October Revolution. But, today, more than a century after the October Revolution, the working class remains divided. In this context, **Michael D. Yates**, author of *Can the Working Class Change the World?* (Monthly Review Press, 2018) among other works, longtime union activist, labor educator, and editorial director of Monthly Review Press and former associate editor of *Monthly Review* magazine, focuses on the question of working-class unity in the following August 2020 interview with **Farooque Chowdhury**, author and editor of a number of books on working-class history, capitalist crisis, the environment, and microcredit. Chowdhury writes from Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Farooque Chowdhury: Nowadays, far-reaching rage and protests are unfolding in many countries. Hundreds of thousands of people are marching, demanding justice, dignity, equity, safety, and security. These protests are questioning and challenging state machines, ultimately turning into political struggle with political slogans. However, in certain contexts, these struggles occur along color or caste lines instead of class lines despite the ruling class and its state machine being united as a single force to control every sphere of working-class life. From jobs, infrastructure, and incarceration to recreation, land, and home life, the ordinary people are unceasingly under attack. In this context, how do you understand today's struggles in a number of countries operating along color or caste lines instead of class lines?

Michael Yates: This is a complicated question. Historically the capitalists have used all manner of differences within the working class—differences of skill, gender, religion, ethnicity, skin color, for example—to divide the working class, to make one group hostile to another so that workers will not see themselves as a class and act in unity against the capitalists. There are many examples of this. Today, in India, most Hindus and Muslims belong to the working class. Yet, the government, in league with capital, has fomented religious hatred against Muslims, resulting in mass violent repression, supported in part by many ordinary citizens who in terms of creed belong to the Hindu community. In the United States, Donald Trump has overtly encouraged violence against immigrants, Chinese Americans, and Black people. All three groups are made up overwhelmingly of workers. Yet, more than a few white workers support this and some have followed through with acts of racist violence. What is more, after months of Trump's murderous handling of the pandemic, 50 percent of the white persons surveyed support him. Many of these have to be workers. In the United States, employers have always tried to divide workers. International Harvester had a policy of allocating jobs according to ethnicity, putting working groups together who spoke different languages and often had historic animosities. The idea was that this would make solidarity all the workers very difficult to achieve.

Black workers were typically consigned to the worst, most dangerous jobs and were always paid much less than white workers. Given the history of slavery in

the United States and the endless propaganda proclaiming the innate inferiority of Black people, this workplace discrimination fed right into white racial prejudices. If Black workers performed work no one else wanted to do, and for lower wages, then this was surely a sign that this is all they deserved to have.

It is a fact that capitalism tends to bring forth the workers it needs, both in terms of the labor itself but also in terms of the personalities of the workers. What is more, it brings forth the organizations it needs. Hence, historically, many unions prohibited Black workers from becoming members. Or, if they could become members, it was only in special all-Black local unions. There were even national unions that were organized specifically by and for Black workers, such as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (Black people who labored in the sleeping cars on trains).

Ironically, even in those unions that readily admitted Black members in multiracial locals, Black workers were often subject to discrimination. In the United Steel Workers Union, for example, seniority (length of service) was not based on how long a worker had been working in a particular plant or been a union member, but rather on the specific department they were in. Black workers had historically been confined to the dirtiest, most dangerous, and lowest-paid jobs in foundries and coke plants. The contracts the union agreed to with the steel companies kept this arrangement intact. So, suppose a coke plant Black employee had worked in that department for twenty-five years. He then manages to fill an opening in another department, say, the machine shop. Further, suppose that no one in the new department has twenty-five years seniority in the plant; in fact, assume that no one has more than ten years of plant seniority. Next, imagine that there is a layoff in the machine shop. Who will lose the job? It will be the Black worker, the man who has worked at least fifteen more years in the plant than any of his machine shop coworkers. It took the threat of a civil rights lawsuit against both the companies and the union to force a change in this discriminatory system. Most white workers loved the old system because it benefited them, and they often resented the change that made Black workers their equals. Similar lawsuits were common in all-white construction unions. In the United Auto Workers Union, one that had a very liberal reputation and supported the civil rights laws enacted by the federal government in the 1960s, Black workers became so angry that in the 1970s they formed all-Black labor organizations, in what they termed the Revolutionary Union Movement.

They picketed union headquarters demanding an end to racial discrimination, which they said was sanctioned by the union. They chanted in reference to the union's acronym (UAW) that it meant *U Ain't White!* I might add that, overwhelmingly, union officers in the United States are still, in 2020, white, even as the percentage of Black union members continues to rise.

Similar conditions have applied to women. Coal miners actually believed that it was bad luck for a woman to work in a mine. And in many workplaces, women have faced resentment, harassment, and violence, including rape, from white male workers. If we look today, few women are top union officials, and if they are, it is very likely that most members of that union are women, as is the case, for example, in the teachers' unions. Most elementary and secondary teachers (pre-college) in the United States are women. The same is true for nurses and childcare workers. When women demand employment in what have been traditionally male occupations, they have been met by considerable resistance from men, irrespective of whether or not any particular workplace is unionized.

We can extend our examples by returning again to the world outside of the United States. During the early days of modern industries in India under British colonial rule, the mill owners played with religious sentiment among the workers belonging to the Hindu and the Muslim communities. In post-1947 India, working people have been victimized, driven out in different regions at different times in the name of regional chauvinism. They have experienced threats, arson, destruction of their homes, and other types of assaults.

In Africa, the exploiting classes had the same tactics. The Nazis pursued similar policies, championing the "Aryan Race" and persecuting those considered racially inferior, such as Jews and Roma people. In pre-October Revolution Russia, the tsarist rulers did the same. In Bolivia today, the present ruling clique is now arousing sentiment along religious and ethnic lines, demonizing Indigenous people and using the Bible to justify what they are doing.

At different times and places, those who rule use skin color, creed, caste, gender, or nationality. But the goal is always the same: divide the working class.

Before responding to the next questions, let me make two points. I am only concerned with racial, gender, religious, and any other differences within the working class and how these can be overcome so that the working class

becomes unified. I am not concerned with arguments and movements aimed, for example, at ensuring that there are more women and people of color in top executive or political positions. A boss is a boss whether that boss is a woman, a gay person, a Hindu or Muslim, a Black person, a Latinx person, etc. The same is true of senior political operatives. Indira Gandhi was no more a champion of the working class than was Winston Churchill. There are also unions and other kinds of working-class organizations that have made serious efforts to overcome the differences within the working class, those that have surely impeded the class struggle.

In the United States, there is a history of Black unions and unions of other people of color. It is in fact a quite recent history. Do you see that as a tactic of capital in order to further segregate working people? Has that phase—of separate unions along color lines—passed?

The formation of unions by Black workers followed two patterns, as I mentioned. In most cases, they were forced to be in all-Black locals of national labor unions. This was because of the racist practices of the white-led unions themselves. Such separate unions are no longer legal, and to my knowledge, none now exist. Of course, employers were happy that unions were split. Yet, white workers seldom agitated for an end to this practice. And they gained some from it, in the form of higher wages, better jobs, and feelings of superiority that should not be ignored in terms of their importance.

Where specifically Black unions or Black worker organizations were formed, they were established because existing unions either had no interest in organizing majority-Black workforces or because the unions had failed to address specifically Black grievances. This is why A. Philip Randolph helped form the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in the 1920s. It did receive a charter from the American Federation of Labor, but it was a Black union with Black leaders. These leaders were important members of Black communities, which were rigidly segregated throughout the country. And these men helped spearhead the U.S. civil rights movement. Another union that was comprised overwhelmingly of a particular group of non-white workers was the United Farm Workers. In the U.S. West, where it began, nearly all farm workers were either Chicano (of Mexican descent but born in the United States) or Mexican immigrants. However, even in this union, there were some sharp differences. The unionization of farm workers in California, the leading agricultural state, had been spearheaded by immigrants

from the Philippines. Considerable animosity took place between the Chicano-led union of César Chávez and Filipino leaders. There were even differences between Chicanos and Mexicans. The latter were typically more radical and militant, and Chávez tried to make sure that they did not obtain leadership positions in the union that could challenge his power. At one point, the union engaged in violent struggle against workers from Mexico who entered the country without documents, behaving on some occasions in ways every bit as ruthless as Trump.

Much the same can be said of Black (as well as Latinx and women's) organizations that tried to pressure unions to adhere to their principles of equality.

Today, there are caucus groups (subgroups within a union) that represent specifically the interests of oppressed groups, such as women, Black workers, people of color, and gay workers. These have been made necessary by the failure of many unions to make sure members are treated fairly and equally, and that their special concerns are met. For example, women want good maternity leave contract provisions, and they also want union meetings to provide childcare. So, these caucuses are not divisive but necessary to forge true unity in the working class.

The capitalist system, in its entirety, is the obstacle to emancipation from all inhumanity, indignity, wretchedness, barbarity, and exploitation. The Nazis tactfully appealed to a majority of people while spewing hatred against the rest of Germany. Sometimes, especially in the electoral arena, one section of the exploiting class will lend support to protesters demanding justice and dignity in order to settle a factional fight, while another section of the capitalist class pulls in another part of the population into its fold, cementing divisive politics from the top. In the face of this, does organizing along color or caste lines lead down an emancipatory path or does it, rather, ultimately play into the hands of the exploiting class? Do struggles along oppression-specific lines help build up struggle against the entire capitalist system that continues to pit people against each other?

As I said in response to the first question, the ruling class always tries to divide the working class. What we must do is make certain that the working class (and

peasant class where this is important in terms of numbers and struggles) is not divided internally. We know that there have been working-class organizations (labor unions, political organizations, and direct action groups) that have actively worked to generate a cohesive and class-conscious membership. Let me provide some examples. When the Chinese Communist Party, under the leadership of Mao Zedong and others, was waging war against both the Japanese invaders (during the Second World War) and the reactionary forces of Chiang Kai-shek, it paid special attention to differences among the peasants and workers that formed its base. First, it recognized that there were differences among the peasants themselves in terms of land tenure. While the landlords and rich peasants were dealt with harshly, the middle and poorer peasants were not. The main concern of the Communists was for the poorest peasants, who were given land to till and made an integral part of both the radical restructuring of their lives and the Red Army. However, the middle peasants were treated fairly as well, because they could then be educated to ally with the poorest peasants. Both groups could also be made to see the need to defeat the Japanese and the Kuomintang. Similarly, women in China had faced especially oppressive treatment, more so than men. Therefore, the Communists singled women out for special changes, such as changes in marriage and divorce, an end to the binding of feet, and the integration of women into the Red Army and every political organization formed by the Communists in rural areas. Finally, there were areas of China where Islam was the dominant religion, and there were also areas dominated by Indigenous peoples. The Communists dealt with these groups in a sympathetic way, taking into consideration their differences with the Han Chinese. Overall, the idea was to build unity and break down preexisting prejudices within the peasant and working classes.

In the United States, the Communist Party before the 1950s (when it suffered persecution and eventually became a shell of its former self and no longer much of a radical force in the country) paid special attention to Black workers. It tried its best, sometimes successfully, even in the deep South where white racism was especially virulent, to forge Black-white worker unity. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, labor unions led by the Party or greatly influenced by it made considerable strides in organizing Black workers and making them integral parts of racially integrated unions. A good example is the United Packinghouse Workers Union, the union of those who worked in the meatpacking industry.

Black workers had the worst jobs, but their jobs were critical work in terms of the disassembly lines on which animals were killed and then cut up into component parts for packing and sale. If these workers were not unionized, the union effort would fail. However, the union was not just doing what it had to do to get the workers organized, it was also building Black-white unity to confront the bosses. Black workers had to be considered equal to white workers, with the same wages and chances to bid on any particular jobs that opened. What is more, Black and white union leaders then went into the neighborhoods where workers lived, and forced—through demonstrations and boycotts—businesses such as restaurants, bars, hotels, and retail shops to integrate and cease discriminating against Black people. By the mid-1950s, the union had compelled companies to pay workers among the highest industrial wages in the country, even more than steel workers. Black and white workers alike received these high wages. Union leadership was not all-white, as in many unions—there were Black officers too.

A more contemporary example comes from Australia in the 1970s, the Building Laborers Federation. Led by Jack Munday and a group of radicals, a union of poor largely immigrant workers, dominated by gangsters and corrupt officials, was transformed from the bottom up into a militant, class-conscious union concerned with more than workplace issues. During the 1970s, the union employed mass flying pickets to shut down building sites, crippling the boom in urban high-rise construction. These strikes allowed the workers to make enormous gains in pay, benefits, training, and dignity. At the same time, the Building Laborers Federation “experimented with the ideas of workers’ control, occupying construction sites, electing their own foremen, staging sit-ins and ‘working in’ in response to lockouts, poor safety conditions and sackings.” These tactics were used to bring women and Aboriginal people into the union and onto the jobs. The union used bilingual organizers and had its literature and meeting proceedings translated into the languages of its European immigrant members. It brought to the membership the idea of “green bans” on ugly and environmentally destructive building projects, winning approval for refusal to work on such sites. Mass meetings and democratic assent were required for all union actions.

We see from all of these examples that, first, splits inside the working class are real and, second, they must be dealt with internally if worker unity is to be the outcome.

After any theoretical formulation comes the question of strategy—how do we bring about working-class unity? We know that capitalism divides people through oppression, exploitation, and politics of hatred. In other words, capital sabotages the struggle of the entire exploited class against the entire exploiting class. While organizing the struggle for emancipation, how do we fight against the divisive politics that the ruling class foments in society?

Some of the answer to this question is in what I said in the response to the previous question. Concrete examples from the past help show the way for the future. However, a few points are worth making here. First, to win the masses to a radical program of social transformation, every working-class organization must have a set of radical principles, principles that will never be compromised. It might have shifting tactics and sometimes overall strategy, but these must not run afoul of the basic principles. The Chinese Communists said, as a rallying cry, *Land to the Tillers*—that is, those who worked the land should possess it. When it made a tactical alliance with the Kuomintang in the war to defeat the Japanese, it limited land distributions to peasants. But it did not abandon the principle, and soon enough resumed the distributions. Labor unions and radical political parties must have as a principle the abolition of the wage system and in its place the establishment of worker control of workplaces, production for use (for the people), and substantive equality in all aspects of social life. Such organizations must be steadfastly anti-imperialist. And these days, they must definitely and vigorously champion the ecosocialist use of the earth, so that humans can begin once again to live in harmony with nature. And as we have discussed, key principles will have to be those that demand equality between genders, between Black and white and all people of color, between queer and straight people, etc.

Second, working-class organizations must engage in and support direct actions. A good example is the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil. Its motto is “Occupy, Resist, Produce.” As I put it in a forthcoming article: “Occupy unutilized land, typically stolen from peasants and the poor in the first place. Then resist with force, if necessary, attempts by the powerful to take the land back. Then, begin to produce on the land, distributing the product among the direct laborers and the community in an egalitarian manner.” The radical Black Panther Party, active in the United States in the 1960s and ’70s, initiated a great many programs to benefit poor Black people: daycare, free breakfast programs, health

clinics, and numerous others. Urban farming, cooperatives, and the like can give workers experience in managing their own lives and at the same time provide goods and services for the community. As people of diverse identities work together, they inevitably come to see each other as workers and full human beings deserving to take control of their lives and society at large.

Third, education is of great importance. How else will workers learn to overcome the differences that capitalists and their supporters in government use to split the working class? All working-class organizations must have ongoing educational programs. If workers join the organization, education must be mandatory. Political economy, history, the history of the organization, working-class struggles of all kinds, culture, food production, ecology, all must be taught. And the teaching has to be done by example, in a democratic setting, in which teachers and students are equals learning from one another.

Finally, workers are not just workers but full human beings, with communities, interests of all kinds, and concerns that go beyond work. All parts of life must be part of working-class organizational struggles. Housing, the environment, health care, family life, schooling, leisure, transportation, you name it. Workers will be much more attracted to such organizations than just to those that focus entirely on work.

Let me sum up this way. There are those on the left, certainly in the United States, who believe that the best way to unify the working class is to push hard for programs that they claim will benefit all workers, irrespective of their identity. Some of these programs, as articulated by the Democratic Socialists of America, would be guaranteed employment at a decent wage (with the state providing a large number of jobs so that full employment can become a reality), Medicare for All (health care paid for by the state), and a Green New Deal (to alleviate global warming and provide millions of well-paid jobs). Since women, Black people, and all other persons of color are overrepresented among the poorly paid, are least likely to have good health care, and are most likely to live in environmentally compromised places, such programs would benefit them relatively more than white men or rich people in general. Hence, such reforms would automatically generate greater equality among all groups of people.

What this political strategy misses is that racism, patriarchy, and homophobia are more than matters of economics. They are deeply embedded in the psyches of almost all white straight men. And they are embedded in nearly every aspect of life, not just employment and earnings. A simple but rather stunning example will make this clear. The medical instrument known as a pulse oximeter is a relatively simple and inexpensive device to measure how oxygenated a person's blood is. This measurement has been critical in determining treatment for persons with COVID-19. Well, lo and behold, there is a racial bias built into these instruments, and even though this has been known for some time and even though it can be remedied, nothing has been done about it. The oximeter was only ever tested originally on white persons, and because their skin color allows light to pass through their skin more easily, readings for whites are more accurate than they are for Black people. A doctor who took a reading for whites that would dictate a radical treatment would get a different reading (a higher and what would appear to the doctor a better one) for a similarly situated Black person. Hence, the latter would be denied a treatment they should have had, all because their skin was darker and light could not as easily penetrate it. What good would universal social democratic measures do to correct this racial bias?

Examples like this could be multiplied a thousandfold. In the United States, it would be great if everyone received publicly financed medical care. However, as many studies show, Black persons right now receive inferior medical care, no matter the financing. So, unless special efforts are made to rectify this, including the education of health care providers, who are often enough themselves, even if unintentionally, perpetrators of racial prejudice, then how will health care equality be achieved in a universal health care program?

Racism and patriarchy, to take the two most common examples, are embedded in the institutions of capitalist society, and the result of this is that they are also embedded in people's brains. It would seem essential that in every working-class organization, they must be rooted out, confronted directly and ended, so that a unified working class can face capital, prepared for the divisive tactics that will be thrown at the working class by its enemies. Once in a class I was teaching to unionized automobile workers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a white man made a disparaging comment about people who received public assistance from the government. A Black woman took issue with this and challenged her union brother. A heated discussion took place, and in the end,

the white man saw that what he had said was wrong. Why not have these discussions as often as needed, wherever needed, so that we can see one another as real, suffering human beings, each with pretty much the same desire for happiness as the other?

Working-class organizations, unions, peasant organizations, and organizations focused on the exploited people in India and other countries can also carry on analyses along the lines discussed above, with the goal of uniting all the exploited, not only the superexploited *Dalits* but other oppressed groups as well, and this will widen the working-class camp by winning over the rest of the exploited people who are also exploited by the same capital. It should be noted with great concern that the exploiting classes in many countries are organizing right-wing unions, using ultranationalist, chauvinist, anti-immigrant slogans and archaic ideas opposed to the interest of the working class. These are unions without a class point of view, unions supportive of color or caste discrimination, unions without any program against exploitation, and presenting no analysis of the way the working class is exploited. These ruling-class deceptions aim to win the support of the exploited classes by confusing the workers in them.

Thank you for discussing some of today's burning issues.

Thanks.