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Racism on Every Side: Good Unionism Will Lead to Good Race Relations . . . Someday

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Racism on Every Side: Good Unionism Will Lead to Good Race Relations . . . Someday

Abstract

[Excerpt] "This is not a black union, white union, red, brown, or green. This is a union of workers who, over the past 50 years or so, have struggled to make life a little easier for future members of this great union. These workers have had to put up with the likes of the Chicago Board of Education, the City of Chicago, the Chicago Park District, and the Cook County Commissioners. And, we must be prepared to continue this struggle."

As a black man, as a former union organizer in both the North and South, and now as a local President, I know about white racism. I know what to expect and I'm ready for it. But racism from every side – sometimes subtle, sometimes explicit – is more difficult to deal with. Sometimes you confront it directly, sometimes you have to ignore it. Sometimes you make a point and move on. Always, you agitate and organize.

Keywords

racism, unionism, labor movement, Chicago, worker rights, organizing

S.E.U.
E.I.U.
LOCAL
46
L-CIO



Racism on Every Side

Good unionism will lead to good race relations . . . someday

■ *Jarvis Williams*

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Those were my opening remarks as I assumed the leadership of the Public Service Employees Union, Local 46 of the Service Employees (SEIU). In addition to a four-minute speech, I introduced my newly hired Business Agent, Cathy, a young Caucasian woman whom I had known for what seemed like a hundred years. Cathy would represent workers at the Chicago Park District. It was after the introduction of Cathy that I was made to realize that I needed to deal with a real problem that would follow me for the rest of my career as a union leader.

One of my African-American members asked to be recognized so that she could voice her displeasure with my selection of a "white woman" because people would feel more comfortable

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being represented by one of their own.

I tried to dispel the member's feeling by assuring her that I had known and worked with Cathy for a long period of time and that she was both competent and capable of handling any and all problems that arose at the Park District. Secondly, if there was any problem that Cathy couldn't handle, then she would have me as a back-up.

As the local grew, I began to hire staff to reflect the composition of the local's membership. So I hired Rick and Cindy, both Mexican-Americans who spoke Spanish fluently. When I sent Rick to one of the West Side parks, I received a call from the same African-American woman who said, "We are not satisfied with your choice of representatives—they don't know anything about the Park District." Having been in the world for the last 46 years, I knew exactly what she meant.

It took awhile for Rick to gain the workers' confidence, but he finally did. At the time, I thought to myself, "Why in hell would people who have experienced racial prejudice all of their lives practice the same things that they claim to have fought against for years!" I firmly believe that if I had hired a person who was three feet tall, workers would have complained that he was too short and therefore unacceptable as a Business Agent.

The local did not lack for white racism, of course, but people were usually more circumspect in expressing it. Once we had a dues increase that affected both full dues-paying members and fair share fee-payers. In the first week alone, I received about 300 calls from members calling me every name in the book, but none of them had racial overtones. At the end of the first week, I received an anonymous letter that, after complaining about the dues, ended by calling me a "200-pound piece of shit Nigger."

As a black man, as a former union organizer in both the North and South, and now as a local President, I know about white racism. I know what to expect and I'm ready for it. But racism from every side—sometimes subtle, sometimes explicit—is more difficult to deal with. Sometimes you confront it directly, sometimes you have to ignore it. Sometimes you make a point and move on. Always, you agitate and organize.

"MANAGING DIVERSITY" IN LOCAL 46

Local 46 is a large and diverse local union, with more than 12,000 members, most of whom work for the Board of Education, the County and the Park District, with an additional 1,000 members working for the City of Chicago. Racially, a little more

than half the union is African-American and a growing percentage, now about 30%, is Hispanic. Women make up about 60% of the membership.

It took awhile, but the membership for the most part has accepted the fact that a black man is president of their local. However, I do get the occasional dirty look. Most of these looks come from Park District members who, for years, have been led by white men. One particular instance was at a unit meeting where someone made it a point to walk up to me after the meeting and tell me that I should not get him wrong, but that the membership would never support a black man as their president. This is pretty evident by the number of white people who show up at meetings.

One other bit of evidence of racism is the relationship between my vice president and I. You see, Cathy is a Caucasian female who is too damned honest to be prejudiced against anybody or anything. She is my friend as well. Because of that, she may hold my arm while walking down the street as a gesture of friendship or hug me because of some good news that we have received. She has done this in the presence of both black and white members. The black members have been heard to say, "Why doesn't that white bitch hold on to one of her own kind?" Some white members, on the other hand, say that she must be a "Nigger Lover."

Cathy still occasionally holds my arm while walking together, but generally does not do so to appease those members who have problems with that kind of behavior. Wouldn't you know it? People who had never spoken to me before started speaking. They not only greet me now, they stop and have 10 minute conversations. I truly believe that this change in attitude has been brought about because of our sensitivity to the racism of some of our members.

Early on in my career, I noticed that most union leaders hired their friends or relatives as union reps. I figured it must be that they didn't want someone on their staff whom they could not trust, and besides, they had a son or some other relative they were tired of taking care of. This type of situation leads to more problems than they're worth. Shortly after taking office, I noticed that the Local 46 staff was comprised of former workers from the Park District and Board of Education who had no formal training. The only thing they ever had to write was their names on their paychecks. There was no accountability in terms of reporting and no written notes, memos or any other document to members or stewards.

I instituted monthly staff meetings where we talked about problems in each union rep's area in order to collectively work on problems that were similar in nature. These meetings received a mixed review. My Treasurer at the time was the ring leader in physically showing his displeasure, with long yawns and sighs, at being tied down on a Friday afternoon with something as silly as a staff meeting. Only one of the union reps actually understood what was going on and begged for more training.

Prior to 1986, Local 46 stewards were mere dues collectors and had no idea how to file a grievance, let alone deal with problems at the worksite. So, we developed a six-day stewards' training class where new stewards, as well as those who were already in place, could learn the basics of filing grievances and dealing with members' complaints. We also used this program to weed out bad stewards who were management tools or in it for the dues rebate. I taught the class myself because I felt that these people should deal with members from the same perspective as their President. To make the stewards aware of my sincerity, I even taught them how to get rid of the union if they so desired.

In January 1991 my (then) Treasurer served notice that he was going to run against me for the presidency of the local. It became clear early in the campaign that my opposition, with its base in the patronage-laden Park District, was going to play "the race card." A union rep who supported the opposition told us of the following incident: the rep had called our Treasurer to tell him that a member was in trouble and needed immediate representation. Our Treasurer asked, "Are they black or white?" When the union rep replied that the member in trouble was black, he said, "Let 'em die." He is no longer our Treasurer. Our leadership and staff was now divided by the election process, and my opposition was particularly good at what is politely called "negative campaigning." But members called in every day to express their support and to volunteer their time to staff the phones, mail letters or do whatever was necessary to make sure that I still was in charge of running the union. I won reelection by a healthy margin.

I used this election victory as a basis for ridding the local of dead weight and hiring a new group of union reps who had the same commitment I had. I took these new union reps from the rank and file because I felt they would have more of a feel for workers' complaints as well as being knowledgeable about the various managers in the local's different units. Some of the new union reps came out of the ranks of our steward system, and they had a leg up on other potential candidates. One of the new reps had community organizing experience, so she didn't need a whole lot

of organizer training, but she did need training in other areas.

We now have regular monthly staff meetings where I listen to their suggestions as well as remind them of how important it is to keep communicating with the membership, which is something that I drone into their heads—and even practice myself. For years Local 46 survived without having someone on staff who could speak a foreign language. What they did when they needed someone to interpret is still a mystery to me. In 1986 we hired an office clerical who could read, write, and speak Spanish so that our Spanish-speaking members who called in to voice complaints would have someone to talk to. Since then, we've hired two union reps who can speak Spanish and who strengthen our representation of our Spanish-speaking workers. We also have a person on staff who can read, write, and speak Polish. With the current influx of Eastern Europeans into the workforce, this will give us a necessary tool to effectively represent them as well.

It's skills and leadership ability that we've focused on in developing a new staff. Though we've been sensitive to the need for our staff to reflect the racial, ethnic, and gender composition of our membership, that hasn't been our main focus. I believe good unionism leads to the best race relations. We are all workers and have one common enemy: the boss. And, if we don't start to get ourselves as well trained and sophisticated as he or she is, we will never gain an equal share of the profits, respect, dignity, and strength that we need to carry on.

CONCLUSION

Racism in the labor movement has become somewhat of a paradox for me because I have problems with my own race as well. When I took office, many of the white members didn't like me because I am black. Conversely, some black people started to lose face with me because I did not cater to their whims simply because we are of the same race.

I have had African-American stewards who did not want to represent white members because they felt that because they were white, they had to be part of the problem. It took a lot of convincing to make them understand that the problems white workers have are the same problems black workers have.

Call me crazy, but I truly believe that one day people will judge others on the basis of their hearts and not by the color of their skin. In the meantime, I try to act as if that day has come. ■