

Unions ignore long history of excluding minorities from jobs

By Shamed Dogan

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Missouri has taken great strides forward in restoring free-market approaches to our economy. Thanks to the efforts of a Republican Legislature and governor, Missouri is open for business. We have passed right-to-work legislation and have begun to challenge the stranglehold that union bosses hold over the labor market.

However, this development has not come without a fight; union organizers and bosses are angry because these changes upset the established order. While these union bosses argue that they best represent Missouri workers, they ignore their long history of excluding minority Americans from jobs and opportunities. Although labor unions have made some positive contributions, we must not forget their legacy of discrimination, prejudice and racism.

For decades, unions worked to exclude black Americans from jobs. White workers felt endangered by black Americans who were willing to work longer and harder, so labor unions used legislation to force blacks out of unions, and out of the labor market.

Herbert Hill, the labor director of the NAACP, wrote about this fact in 1959. In his seminal article “Labor Unions and the Negro: The Record of Discrimination,” he noted, “the Negro worker’s historical experience with organized labor has not been a happy one. ... Trade unions practice either total exclusion of the Negro, segregation (in the form of ‘Jim Crow’ locals or ‘auxiliaries’), or enforce separate, racial seniority lines which limit Negro employment to menial and unskilled classifications.”

One such tool wielded against minorities was prevailing wage laws. In the 1930s, New York Congressman Robert Bacon, angry that black Americans were competing with white workers for jobs, introduced the Davis-Bacon Act, which requires contractors on federally funded construction projects to pay the “local prevailing wage.” This policy has been implemented in many states as well, including Missouri, to force governments to only negotiate with white-dominated unions. This policy remains as a vestige of a racist past, and it harms American workers and taxpayers to this day.

In addition, minimum wage laws were instituted a century ago in large part to prevent white workers from having to compete with cheaper labor from immigrants and African-Americans. Even though today’s “Fight for \$15” effort to raise the minimum wage to \$15/hour is supported by many minority groups with good intentions, it would likely have the unintended consequence of replacing young low-wage workers with older workers, disproportionately hurting minority youth.

Unfortunately, the days of union bosses fighting to protect their own interests over the interests of minority workers are not just in the past. According to a 2016 report prepared for the AFL-CIO, “Whole sectors of workers have been ignored or neglected by the labor movement for shortsighted or xenophobic reasons. ... Those workers also tend to be largely people of color and women, further enlarging the racial and gender divide that makes up the labor movement.”

And in Virginia’s recent election, unions made headlines for successfully demanding that the African-American candidate for lieutenant governor be deleted from the Democratic Party’s campaign mailers and then excluding him from the union’s sample ballot on Election Day. (The candidate, Justin Fairfax, won despite the union’s opposition.)

Here in Missouri, union leaders have long clashed with African-American leaders because of a lack of inclusion on big union projects and a disparity in contributions to African-American political candidates, even when those candidates have pro-union voting records. Before her comments hoping for President Donald Trump to be assassinated thrust her into the national spotlight, state Sen. Maria Chappelle-Nadal, D-University City, made headlines last year with a speech on the Senate floor that highlighted “the racism and inequality that exists in the labor movement” and in which she read numerous racist and sexist comments from union members directed to her on social media.

Though the unions have formed various diversity councils and hired staffers to work on making their ranks more diverse, they still have a long way to go to produce the hoped-for results.

Systems designed to be discriminatory and anti-competitive should not be the basis for our economy: Prevailing wage, arbitrary minimum wages and forced union membership are examples of policies that unfairly exclude Americans from the workplace. For Missouri to move forward, we should not allow such misguided policies to determine employer/employee relations. Bold reform is needed, and the Republican Legislature is paving the way for just that.

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