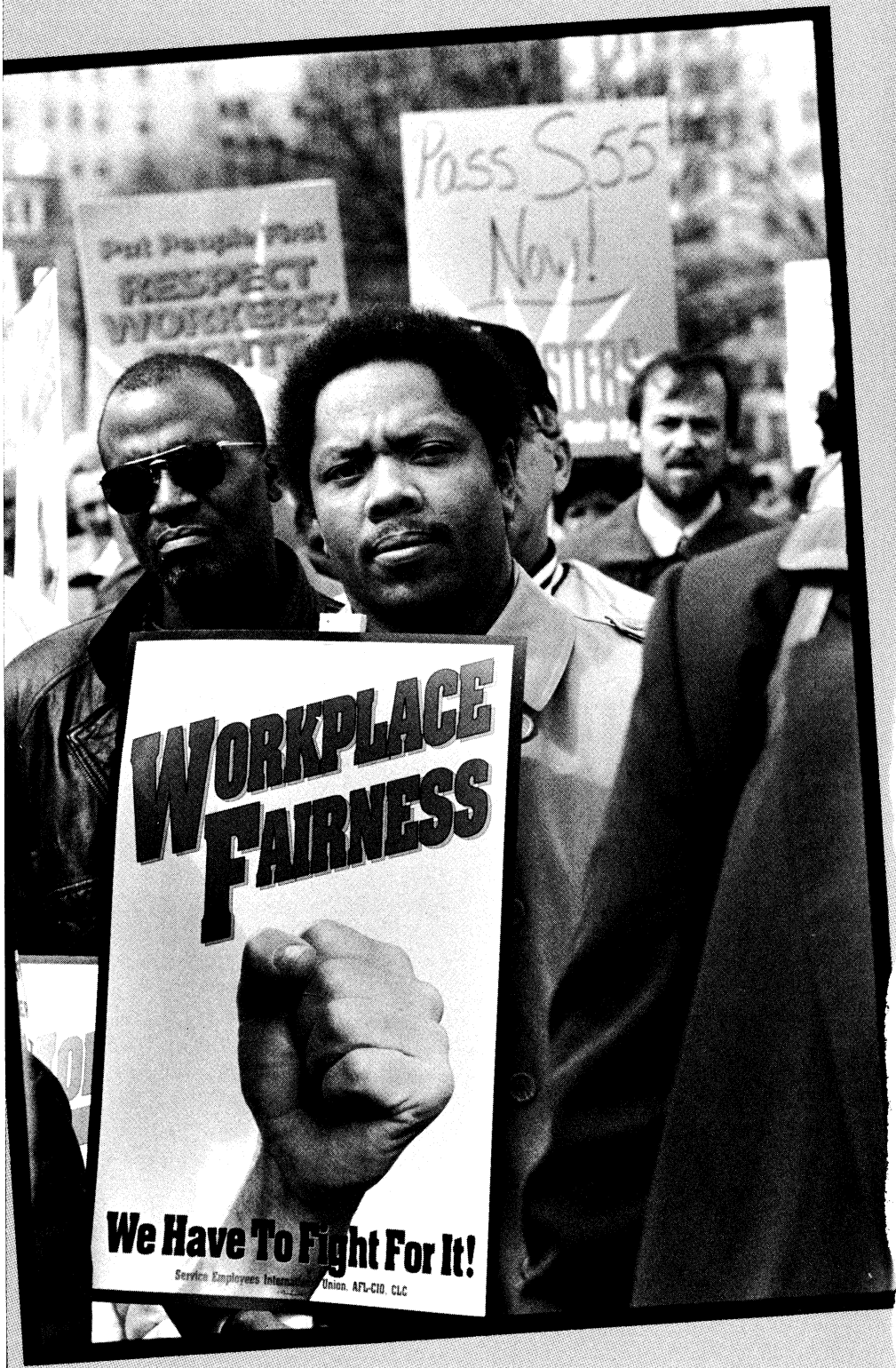
Pass S55
Now!
WORKPLACE
FAIRNESS
We Have To Fight For It!
Union, AFL-CIO, CLC

Making Labor A Powerful Force

The Role of the CBTU

An Interview with Brenda Stokely by Larry Adams, concerning the AFL-CIO Full Participation Conference and making the rhetoric of "inclusion" and "diversity" in organized labor into a reality.

Q: In addition to being President of your local, you're also involved with the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU). Could you begin by describing your involvement with CBTU?

A: I've been a member of the New York Chapter of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists for a number of years. The New York chapter is the largest and most independent chapter and I participate in their conventions as the co-chair of the Resolution Committee. I am also the chair of the Scholarship Committee of the CBTU New York Youth Committee.

Q: You participated in the Full Participation Conference just prior to the AFL-CIO Convention?

A: Yes. Our local's entire board, which is made up of people of color, went to that Convention as a board and we participated at that level. I was not there officially representing CBTU, but was one of the CBTU members who participated in it.

■ *Brenda Stokely is president of Local 215 of District Council 1707, AFSCME, a local of approximately 3500 service workers who work for non-profit organizations in New York City. Larry Adams is President of the National Postal Mail Handlers Union, Local 300, (New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut), and a member of the Editorial Committee of* Labor Research Review.

Q: What were your impressions of the Full Participation Conference?

A: On one level I think that it was a good thing because it was the first time that anything like this ever occurred in the AFL-CIO. It gave an opportunity for people from the different caucuses—I don't like to call them "support groups"—to come together and exchange.

I felt, however, that it didn't deal deeply enough with the questions. It didn't tackle hard questions, i.e., racism and the AFL-CIO, concrete changes around changing the leadership of the AFL-CIO, or organizing more workers—which were my main concerns.

Q: Who participated in the Full Participation Conference?

A: There seemed to be substantial representation from all of the caucuses. The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists had a number of people there, some of whom were also on the committee that organized the conference. CLUW (The Coalition of Labor Union Women) was represented. LACLA, which represents Latin workers; APALA, which represents Asian and Asian-Pacific Americans; and FRONTLASH, which represents youth. So those people were there as well as other AFL-CIO officials.

Q: There is a "New Voice" to be heard in the AFL-CIO with the change of leadership. And one of the things we want to talk about is how it can turn the rhetoric of inclusion into a reality of inclusion?

A: Well, I think one of the things that needs to happen is an ongoing dialogue and forums whereby rank-and-file members of color have a voice in shaping the direction of the AFL-CIO. Right now I think what you have is a top layer of people who are speaking on behalf of the rank-and-file. You have the Black staff of various unions, and you have the leadership of the caucuses, who in many instances are staff people.

Q: What role do you think the Federation itself could play in facilitating rank-and-file involvement?

A: I think they need to have an overall plan to target communities and sectors of workers. I think they need to have town meetings in targeted areas—especially where they're going to do major organizing to bring rank-and-file members, community people, and community leaders into dialogue with union officials and union staff people. That's just one example of something.

In our district council we've begun to go out to the community, to our rank-and-file members, having borough-wide meetings and All-District-Council shop steward meetings. This provides a broader forum

for rank-and-file members to talk about the issues that concern them.

We've found that they don't just talk about workplace issues. They talk about community issues also and the role that they feel that labor should play. For example, in the last shop steward meeting of our district council, they brought up issues about why labor is not involved in seeing that the government and unions themselves provide housing for workers. At one time, there were unions that did do that.

I think that when you speak to other kinds of issues, it makes the union, as an organization of workers, more relevant to the rank-and-file.

Q: Well, the "New Voice" ticket has at least paid lip service to the problems of participation by workers of color and in positions of leadership, etc. Your plan of targeting geographic communities and workers of color presumes recognition of the problem. What role might CBTU and the other "support organizations" play in contributing to that effort?

A: I want to go back and clarify something and add one other point, though. I think that the AFL-CIO's principal mission right now is to organize workers. When I said, "targeting," they should target sectors of workers that need to be organized, and in most instances that's going to be people of color and women.

And in the process of planning to do that organizing—that would be one of the ways that they could bring in the community.

One of the other ways of making the trade union movement more relevant is to decentralize its physical location. We should have community offices where several unions come together and set up an office, rather than offices that are usually separate and apart from where the workers live—even separate from where they work. There can be state-of-the-art equipment to shoot fax letters off. Workers can begin to feel that this is where they can come to send a letter to their congressperson or city councilperson.

We should be telling people, "this is your union and other people's union and it's here to help you." When there's a major issue in the community, there should be a community-based union office where people can go. And, if there's a group of workers—some young people—working at a fast food place and people know that they're not unionized, they can say, "Hey, in the community there are some people you can talk to about how to organize." Rather than sending them downtown to some place that's usually very separate from them. Because the union is so alien to everybody's life. That's why they don't come to meetings, etc. We have to find creative ways to encourage participation.

I think that CBTU and the other caucuses can be more visible. CBTU

New York Chapter, for example, used to be extremely visible in New York City around any major issue that came up—whether it was police brutality, an electoral campaign, or a racist incident in Bensenhurst or Crown Heights—they were out there. They were also in the forefront of the anti-apartheid movement.

That has not been happening for quite some time now. I think that CBTU and all of the other groups need to integrate themselves more into the community. The way you integrate yourself is by taking up issues that are relevant to the community, and making the trade union movement something that really has to do with people's lives.

Right now people don't see any connection. All they see is a union that takes their money and has some fat cat sitting at the top—if they even know that much—and if you have a problem, you go to a shop steward and they'll save the day for you. That's it. That's the beginning and the end of the union. And that's not the way the union should be seen.

Q: Like the union is a source of service as opposed to being an agent for organization and mobilization.

A: Right. "I pay my dues, you serve me." They don't see themselves as really being part of a membership organization or see the union as a fighting arm for them in a real sense.

Q: I think the membership has been lulled into the frame of mind of "They'll do it."

A: And usually when they say "They'll do it," they mean the staff; they mean the lawyers. They don't mean themselves. Even the way that grievance handling is dealt with—it's very seldom done in a way where you're doing internal organizing, organizing a group of workers around an issue, or organizing workers to take a stand to defend an individual worker.

It's so far removed. The process takes such a long time. Sometimes it's even detached from the grievants themselves. People just wait for the results to come down. That needs to change.

I was reading a criticism of unions that said that they do most of the right things when they try to get into a workplace—in terms of internal organizing, one-on-one contact, raising up issues, putting out consistent literature, and building up communication linkages. Then once the union gets in, all of that dissolves. I think that that activity needs to be an ongoing state of existence.

CBTU and all of these groups are not separate and apart from the labor movement. They are the labor movement. And so any of these changes that I'm suggesting are things that CBTU, CLUW, APALA,

etc. would have to be part of—making them specific in terms of the outreach to Asian workers or to women, etc.

Q: What role might CBTU (and the other organizations of workers of oppressed nationalities) play in making the recognition for the need for inclusion become a reality?

A: There are a few things: CBTU and all of these caucuses, to my knowledge, have some language in their mission statement or their constitution [stating] that organizing is their main mission—organizing the unorganized. So I think that they must play a critical role in shaping what that organizing being planned by the AFL-CIO should look like.

The members of CBTU represent most unions, so they have the organizational network to be influential throughout the entire labor movement. Probably some of the other groups do too—CLUW in particular. So they need to use their mission statement as a focus for their work as an organization within the next few years. They need to see that organizing the unorganized takes place. They need to see that there are people of color and women who are the organizers. They need to make it understood that there are particular approaches when organizing people of color versus when you're organizing in other communities. And they need to insure the campaigns can be successful and not just token—that monies are actually put in for training and recruiting people and supporting the campaigns.

Q: Could you give us little background on the formation and structure of CBTU and how that affects its work today?

A: CBTU's Founding Conference was in September of 1972 in Chicago. More than 1200 Black union officials and rank-and-file members came to that conference.

The Conference was chaired by Charles Hayes, vice president of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workers. One of the things that he stated was that there needed to be some kind of ongoing structure that goes beyond November elections and reaches out and gives some direction to the trade union movement.

CBTU was formed in response to an August 1972, AFL-CIO Executive Council Meeting in Miami. There was an attempt by George Meany (the president at the time) to push Nixon as the candidate. There were other people who wanted to support George McGovern. The AFL-CIO eventually took a neutral position. The major issue with the founders of CBTU was this feeling that the labor movement had no democratic forum to decide what candidate to support or, in a lot of instances, what issues to take up. Political endorsements were pri-

marily decided by a very small nucleus of people who were in leadership of the AFL-CIO.

This undemocratic approach still exists today. I know it exists in my International. It also exists in the "support groups" or caucuses. A decision has already been made as to who's going to be supported, and when you come to a meeting or convention, people are already programmed to support one candidate. If you even suggest that there be some discussion, you're considered a "troublemaker."

Everything is orchestrated. Usually the candidate is there or piped in via satellite. All the literature is there. Everything is there to program people to take one position.

Q: One of the things that you say gave rise to CBTU was the lack of democracy in the AFL-CIO hierarchy.

A: And racism. The struggle against racism.

Q: But in fact, in duplicating the lack of democracy in the AFL-CIO, you seem to be saying that CBTU has retarded its own objectives.

A: Yes. The same thing that was criticized in the larger AFL-CIO exists in many of the caucuses. Democracy is not promoted in terms of meaningful discussion of issues or how decisions are made.

For example, development of resolutions, debate, and deciding on resolutions are the cornerstone of any convention, because they shape the action plan of the group. For the most part, there is a subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) attempt to limit discussion, debate, or even the amount or kinds of resolutions that are submitted.

Q: Can you elaborate on CBTU's stated mission?

A: It has several objectives. One is organizing. We want to promote the organization of workers into trade unions. We want to promote collective bargaining as the most viable and democratic way of changing the terms and conditions of employment and having a voice.

It is also our goal to promote legislative and political action. Another objective is to provide research and education to aid unionists to better understand their role within the trade union movement.

In addition, CBTU is committed "to cooperate with other labor organizations, community groups, and other segments of our society in general so that the economic improvements of the American society can be more justly distributed and the moral promise of American life be realized."

Q: How well is CBTU carrying out its stated mission?

A: For the most part in CBTU, they're not really doing any organizing. Nor are they really influential in terms of seeing that organizing is being done. In New York according to our constitution, the Organizing Committee is a standing committee. But it doesn't exist at all. It hasn't functioned. So people have been floundering. In fact, we are in existence in spite of this lack of organizing, not because of it.

Currently, CBTU has been self critical about its having essentially no organizing function. And it urges its members, at all levels and in all cities, to organize seriously. The vast potential of Black workers is not being touched; therefore there is no growth and little activity. I think that if we implement what we have in writing, CBTU and the other caucus organizations could be a very powerful force and make the labor movement itself a very powerful force. This to me is not only the main mission of CBTU, but that of the whole labor movement.

Q: Do you think CBTU can play the role of combating the racism that will undermine the success of the efforts to organize Black workers, particularly in the South? The new AFL-CIO leadership has recruited a thousand or more college students to work on particular organizing drives in the campaign called "Union Summer." What is your perspective on that?

A: As a supplemental approach to organizing, it's good; but as the central approach, I think it's way off base. I think the discussion should be around who are the most important workers to be organized; how can you reach those workers; what are their demands; and who should be organizing them?

For the most part, when Clinton is talking about the economy changing and all these new people coming into the work force, he's talking about work bordering on slave labor—people who are low paid workers with no benefits, with no job security. For the most part, these are women, people of color, and youth.

The workers in those targeted industries in the South, who live and work in those communities and workplaces should be identified and trained to do the organizing. Not just white men from the Northeast or Midwest, or students who don't know the communities they are going to.

Even from a common sense standpoint, it doesn't make sense to do it that way.

It is not that an organizer from the outside cannot learn these things, but why should you have to get someone from outside when you have people who already know the terrain? You're a step ahead of the game when you train the indigenous people as key organizers.

Q: "New Voices" of the AFL-CIO has a stated objective to take up the campaign to organize the South. Do you see a particular role for CBTU in that process?

A: Well, I think CBTU should be in the lead. CBTU and the A. Philip Randolph Institute (APRI) should come together—including workers from the area—to help define what the targets are, state the organizing methodology, and [determine] the areas [to be organized].

The neglect of the South for all these decades has really come to haunt the labor movement. It was based on shortsightedness as well as racism. It has allowed big business to really exploit workers in the South, to essentially create a situation where there is a Third World country, like a colony inside of this country, where the workers have a lower standard of living and are paid less. Those workers have been denigrated and as a result it's denigrating the whole labor movement.

The majority of Black workers still live in the South. And, from my own standpoint, I think of the Southern part of this country as being the national land base for the African American people (just as the Southwest is the national land base for the Chicano people).

CBTU, APRI, and CLUW need to be in the South because we're talking about organizing a lot of women, people of color, and youth. All of the groups that dare to represent those constituents need to be at the table defining and shaping the approach.

CBTU has a historical mission it has to fulfill. To me it has the potential of fulfilling the mission of Black workers taking the lead in the Black liberation movement and Black workers taking the lead for social, political, and economic justice in this country. I was reading somewhere that the state of our role as Black workers represents the vital signs of the labor movement, and also represents the health of the movement for economic and political justice in this country.

It goes back to the question that we're not a "support formation," supporting something. We are an integral, vital, and essential part of the labor movement; and we need to be an essential part of defining, shaping, deciding, formulating, and implementing the main focus and task of the labor movement today.

Q: What are the things that need to change for that potential and role to be fulfilled?

A: The Executive Council needs to continue to be broadened. There needs to be a strategic role for rank-and-file members so that we encourage full, maximum participation of the rank-and-file in defining and shaping the labor movement into a vital, fighting force for social change in this country.

And the only way that's going to happen is if there are really forums that are inclusive; forums where people can have real debate and discussion; where people develop a sense of independence in terms of their agendas. This includes forums where people explore the possibility of not being wedded to the two parties of this country, but that the workers of this country develop a party that represents their interests, with an agenda and a platform of their interests, running candidates that come from the working class. We need to define legislative issues. We also need to define our relationship to other workers in other parts of the world and build a real international connection with these workers. Just as plants run down South, we all know they run to Mexico; they run to El Salvador; they run to Asian countries.

There are just so many things that the labor movement needs to be doing that it hasn't done in so many years, that if you start having discussions about it with a broader group of people—and not have it as a closed circle, where people find out about things after the fact—that in itself will begin to revitalize the labor movement. What alienates a lot of people is that they have no way to be part of defining what should happen, and they don't feel connected.

Q: You mentioned that you could measure the vitality of the trade union movement by its relationship to Black labor. Why?

A: Look at the fact that we were brought here to work, and the fullest employment we had was during slavery! But as the labor movement as we know it in this country has developed historically, from what I remember of history, the Knights of Labor and the IWW and the CIO were the shining moments of labor because of their approach towards the inclusive involvement of Black workers. And wherever you see Black workers being involved and in leadership, they're putting forward some of the most progressive traditions of workers in terms of health & safety issues, in terms of democracy within the unions, etc. We can be the conscience of the labor movement, just as I think the Black Liberation Movement has historically been the conscience of the progressive and revolutionary movement in this country.

CBTU, CLUW, APALA, and all those groups came into existence in a fight for the labor movement to uphold an inclusive, democratic, anti-racist, and anti-sexist tradition. They came into existence to make sure those principles weren't being ignored. And the ongoing purpose is trying to make the labor movement be the best that it can be in its fight for workers' rights—for U.S. workers as a whole, not just Black workers. ■