

Cruel Summer

Posted on July 16, 2013 by Clarence Lang

Events this summer have further demonstrated a cruel irony of African American life in the glare of the nation's first black presidency. Specifically, Barack Obama's historic two administrations have been accompanied by brazen white supremacist reaction and widespread black alienation. Witness the recent fate of the Voting Rights Act and the George Zimmerman jury verdict.

On June 25, the U.S. Supreme Court, in Shelby County v. Holder, effectively gutted the 1965 Voting Rights Act, one of the towering achievements of the post-World War II black freedom movement. The act prohibited racially discriminatory voting practices, and through Section 5 established federal oversight of voting procedures in several states, counties and municipalities. In its 5-to-4 decision last month, the justices struck down Section 4 of the act, which heretofore had determined the jurisdictions covered under Section 5. As of late last year, legislators had introduced restrictive voting laws in over thirty states (Kansas, where I currently live, is one of them.) According to the Brennan Center for Justice, as many as 5 million eligible votes could have been lost in the last presidential election had the Department of Justice not been able to use Section 5 as a bulwark against voter suppression

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efforts. Now, with this current ruling, the court has battered open the door for states to restrict the franchise for millions of voters unimpeded by the federal government.



Labor needs to be at the forefront on social movement issues.

Since then, several states, including Texas, have wasted no time in moving toward austere voter ID laws. A broad swath of the working-class poor and elderly will feel the blow, but black and brown communities will suffer most acutely, especially given the already disenfranchising effects of mass incarceration.

As for the verdict in the Zimmerman trial, I'll quote at length journalist Gary Younge, whose commentary in The Guardian ["Open Seasons on Black Boys After a Verdict Like This," July 14, 2013] goes to the heart of the matter, and does so more gracefully than anything I've so far been able to muster in writing:

> On 26 February 2012 [Trayvon] Martin was on his way home, minding his own business armed only with a can of iced tea and a bag of Skittles. Zimmerman pursued him, armed with a 9 mm handgun, believing him to be a criminal. Martin resisted. They fought. Zimmerman shot him dead.
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> Who screamed. Who was stronger. Who called whom what and when and why are all details to warm the heart of a cable news producer with 24 hours to fill. Strip them all away and the truth remains that Martin's heart would still be beating if Zimmerman had not chased him down and shot him.
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> There is no doubt about who the aggressor was here. It appears that the only reason the two interacted at all, physically or otherwise, is that

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> Zimmerman believed it was his civic duty to apprehend an innocent teenager who caused suspicion by his existence alone. . .
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> Since it was Zimmerman who stalked Martin, the question remains: what ground is a young black man entitled to and on what grounds may he defend himself?

As I've suggested elsewhere, Martin's murder was not only a product of Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law but also the bitter harvest of the racial profiling that has enabled the "war on drugs," facilitated the growth of a racialized carceral state, and normalized black criminality as the common sense of a postindustrial economy. Intellectually, I understood that an acquittal was possible in a society historically unmoved by black suffering and lacking in empathy for youth of color. I knew, too, that the law itself made an acquittal likely.



The labor movement should stand for justice for all.

But like many others with whom I've spoken, both inside and way outside the academy, this verdict still knocked the wind out of me.

Both events are resonating among African Americans across class, and fair-minded people across race. But how is either of them relevant to labor? Simply put, the

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imperiled state of the Voting Rights Act, and the appalling outcome of the Zimmerman trial, provide opportunities for the labor movement to intervene in matters that could, in the long term, buttress the fight for collective bargaining rights, and better pay, work conditions and social wage benefits.

The stakes for labor are clear with regard to voting rights. African Americans, Latinos, and women are a dynamic constituent of organized labor, particularly in the hotel, food service, and public employment sectors. These workers presumably carry labor-oriented priorities with them into the electoral arena, yielding the possibility for turning the tide against reactionary social policy at state level and instituting progressive reforms – that is, if their right to vote is safeguarded. Apropos to the Zimmerman trial, the protection of voting rights also generates more diverse and representative jury pools. To be sure, organized labor has seen much better days. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 11.3% of U.S. workers belonged to unions in 2012, a 97-year low. Yet, with a membership of 14.4 million people, unions are still among the largest constituent groups in the nation. They are certainly larger than the National Rifle Association (NRA), which with a membership of 2-4 million (depending on who you believe) casts a long shadow over gun policy in this nation. The labor movement could marshal its numbers to have a similar impact on voting legislation by publicly and actively joining organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the fight not only to restore the Voting Rights Act but also to guarantee the right to vote at the national level through constitutional amendment or other means. A move in this direction would take the matter out of the purview of (right-wing) party partisanship and the caprices of “states rights.” Granted, the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) is a heterogeneous grouping encompassing diverse histories, constituents, work and living standards, and political outlooks and practices. It is not bound by the single-issue consensus that lends coherence to a group like the NRA, whose ranks include union members. Nonetheless, in the interests of labor and the general citizenry, defending the right to vote for all is worth the effort it may take to consolidate support among the broad rank-and-file of organized labor.

Given the racially fraught history of the U.S. labor movement, the significance of the Trayvon Martin shooting and Zimmerman verdict is perhaps harder for many to understand from a labor perspective. Whether we all recognize it or not, labor has an interest in rallying around issues that, at least on the surface, have nothing to do with union matters as such. Indeed, the labor movement has been at its most

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potent when its leaders, organizers and constituencies have fused workplace concerns to broader quality-of-life initiatives in the realms of housing, parks and public recreation, metropolitan development, community colleges, and civil rights. Elizabeth Shermer has made a compelling case on this blog site for “Why Labor Needs to Ally with LGBTQ Activists,” the latter of whom have dramatically affected the political calculus over the past decade. To this political arithmetic must be added the nonwhite population that is rapidly emerging as the new U.S. majority. Organized labor can choose to embrace such transformations and increase its chances for thriving in the twenty-first century, or stand aloof and find itself on the wrong side of history, as well as obsolete.

From this standpoint, the question of mass incarceration – which has “othered,” criminalized, disenfranchised, and diminished the employment prospects and life chances of millions – has to be owned by labor as a working-class issue, albeit one that disproportionately affects working-class people of color. Interpreted loosely, over twenty states either have some form of “Stand Your Ground” legislation on the books or related doctrines in their existing self-defense laws. The outcome of the Zimmerman trial graphically illustrates the vigilantism and racial terrorism that is likely to continue around the nation. What will be the position of organized labor on this? This moment presents an opening for organized labor to weigh in on a matter that does not involve the point of production, per se, but which could foster important alliances with, and new bases of support from, grassroots forces who may not even have steady employment in formal economies, let alone union jobs. Admittedly, issuing such prescriptions from the sidelines is easy, but hardly sufficient. Nevertheless, the stance that trade unionists take, or fail to take, on these and similar issues can shape how, of even if, organized labor will factor into the consciousness, worldview, and activities of those for whom unionism is an abstract concept. It may also go far in determining the fortunes of the labor movement in the near future.

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