

LAWCHA Statement on Racist Violence and Solidarity in Working-Class History

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The Labor and Working-Class History Association condemns the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and all victims of racist police brutality, and we demand justice. We stand in solidarity with all who are in the streets to protest racist policing and with the thousands who have been attacked by police in the past week. We are heartened by the large numbers and rich diversity of those who have demonstrated their outrage and demanded meaningful change in our criminal justice system and beyond.

We are scholars committed to studying, teaching, and writing about the lives, struggles, and contributions of working people to American history. Central to that history is the African American movement for freedom and dignity against systemic racism and violence at the hands of white civilians, police, and the state. Our research has shown that racist violence is often historically rooted in economic exploitation. From slave patrols and the capture of people escaping enslavement, the exclusion and deportation of immigrants, and the killing and arrest of strikers, police power has been deployed to control labor as well as to limit the freedom of workers, particularly those with black and brown bodies. Often reinforced by segments of the privileged white working class, white elites — through government, police, and mobs — have used their power to break apart multiracial labor organizing, Black Freedom struggles, and other justice movements by firing organizers and through lynching, police brutality, incarceration, and deportation.

Members of the Minneapolis police thought they could execute George Floyd in broad daylight because he was Black but also because he was part of an American working class that politicians, corporate leaders, and others have too often treated as disposable. Floyd moved to Minnesota in search of employment in 2014. He found work as a truck driver and as a restaurant security guard, but lost his job due to the COVID-19 stay-at-home order. An autopsy showed that he had contracted and survived the coronavirus only to be killed by police. Millions of working-class Americans can identify with George Floyd because his economic precarity is their story, too. Black workers are often one police stop, one hospital visit, or one job loss away from disaster. Since they are so often in front-line jobs and so

susceptible to COVID-19's worst symptoms due to generations of substandard healthcare services and barriers to access, many are now one microbe away from death.

We who study labor and working-class communities have analyzed how working people expanded our democracy and narrowed inequality through organizing, resistance, and solidarity. In the past, unions have sanctioned and expelled affiliates that discriminated against Black workers, and some have now affirmed that tradition by holding themselves and their members to high standards of anti-racism and accountability to the communities they serve.

Yet we have also examined moments when white workers embraced what W.E.B. Du Bois termed "the psychological wage" of whiteness and took advantage of their perceived superiority to demand better treatment for themselves only. Today, some police unions use collective bargaining and political influence to shield their members from accountability for brutality and murder against Black people. It is critical, in this moment, that labor recommit itself forcefully to the principle that an injury to one is the concern of all.

Anti-racism is central to LAWCHA's mission. Labor exploitation and racism have always been entwined. As such, we must use our historical knowledge and the power of the pen to speak out and join and support workers who unite and fight racism in all its forms. BLACK LIVES MATTER.

*Approved by the Executive Committee of the Labor and Working-Class History Association,
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Author



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