

Beyond Black & White: An Open Dialogue with Black and Latino Leaders

We are all connected to each other in some way, shape or form. So the idea of tensions are a natural part of the human dynamic. Just as something connects all of us, there are also elements that distinguish us from each other based on experience, culture or racial and ethnic background.

In many ways my union, the Service Employees International Union, embodies the changing face of America. It's also no accident that our ranks – 1.5 million strong and growing – include such a large number of Black and Brown workers, many of them members of immigrant communities.

As we continue to witness the rapidly changing demographics, it is essential for all of us to guard against falling into that divide-and-rule trap.

We cannot allow ourselves to be played by the numbers game. We also cannot afford to be defined simply by race when we know that the battle lines are also being drawn based on class, the haves and the have nots.

[Pause.]

While the demographics have changed, the stakes are no different today. The issues are still drawn along lines of social and economic justice.

The media, employers and politicians will play workers against each other. They will use wedge issues to keep us fighting with each other and preventing us from being clear on who we must stand with to win dignity as workers, as taxpayers and as equal members of this society.

The notion of African American and Latino tensions should not be overplayed. In fact, we also know that tensions exist in the Latino community based on culture, nationality and class.

There are also differences between African Americans and immigrants of African descent. We are working to overcome that. It is a process that requires time and attention. In SEIU we scored major victories when the African American Caucus resolved to focus on immigration and to rename itself the Caucus of African Descent, and our Latino caucus developed a workshop that addresses the racial tension among black and Latino workers.

It was the African American Caucus that brought the resolution to the convention in support of immigrant rights. That resolution led to the creation of the Social Economic Justice Committee, appointed by President Stern.

In the larger society, the powers that be determine who's "colored" and who's not when it suits them.

For instance, at one time, Irish and Italian immigrants were not considered White until it became convenient for them to be pitted against the real colored folks.

In the 60's and 70's, baseball players of African descent from the Dominican Republic were considered Black. Now, ball players of African descent from the same country are considered Latino.

In the land of the free and the home of the brave, we have seen Africans bought and sold; native Americans stripped of their ancestral lands; signs that said Irish and Italians need not apply; special taxes paid by Chinese immigrants; Japanese Americans locked up in concentration camps and Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe denied entry into neighborhoods and social organizations.

And today, Arab Americans are being targeted, profiled and detained for no apparent reason in the so-called war on terrorism.

Uniting people who are similar is easy. What's really hard, is uniting people who are different.

Sometimes it makes us uncomfortable when we examine our own attitudes. But we have to be honest and aware so we don't fall into that trap.

The Bush administration has put a lot of emphasis on trying to expand the Republicans' base by reaching out to Latino voters.

They will try to find issues that they believe separate Latinos from other people of color, especially from African Americans.

And within the Latino community, we sometimes hear suggestions that because 'we're becoming the largest minority' that somehow means that so-called "Hispanic issues" should have greater importance than the concerns of the once dominant but on the decline African- American community.

No ethnic or racial group has a lock on any issue, especially not injustice. Jesse Jackson says what's good for black folks have been good for all folks.

Blacks and Latinos are both struggling for decent wages, adequate health care and quality schools for their children.

The incarceration rates of black and brown young people are both higher than the percentage of their kids in college. Both groups still experience racial discrimination in housing, employment and education. Both black and brown activists are struggling to preserve affirmative action.

Both African American and Latino mothers want safer communities for their children, and pray that their sons will reach the age of 18.

There is no monopoly on racial exploitation. Nor should there be a monopoly on the fight for racial justice!

[Pause.]

What does it mean to be the largest minority? Just ask my people. We have been the largest minority in this country for over 400 years, and we're still struggling for justice!

The operative word here is minority. Being a minority group large or small is still a minority. It still means less than. You remain out-ranked by whatever, or whoever, is defined as the majority.

In our union, we emphasize that our fight should not be over who has less power. The same principle holds true in the broader social justice movement.

It's not about more or less power for each individual group, but how we come together as a united front and a force to be reckoned with.

Martin Luther King Jr. understood this. When he left Alabama and went to Chicago, he quickly realized that it was not only about racial justice but it was also about economic justice.

Caesar Chavez also understood this. He united the Filipino, African-American, Mexican and even Arabic-speaking farm workers into a great movement.

And Jesse Jackson understands this. He always reminds us that the majority of poor people in this country are not Black or Latino. They are White. And they don't all live in Appalachia.

I'd like to see this dialogue and this meeting as a first step – a commitment for African American and Latinos to forge closer unity. We must be focused, serious and relentless in our response to the conservative, right-wing agenda.

Let this dialogue broaden beyond the Latino and African American communities. Let's use this energy to educate allies and build a stronger united front with people across the country who are working for social justice.