

Breaking Down Barriers to Equality: Affirmative Action is Just the Beginning

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INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon! It is so good to be here in Salvador de Bahía at this Public Services International Conference: “Racism Is a Trade Union Issue.”

I would especially like to thank PSI for inviting me to speak this afternoon. From my participation in the 2003 World Social Forum and from my interactions with Brazilian labor leaders at PSI meetings, I have wonderful memories of Brazilian workers’ hospitality, camaraderie, incredible energy, and optimism for social and economic justice.

And, I am encouraged by the fact that you have in President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a leader who is *seriously* focusing on the promotion of racial equality and justice. I believe that the Brazilian labor movement and the social justice movement in our hemisphere should support Lula’s policies that facilitate our common agenda of realizing a better world.

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I want commend all of my brothers and sisters at PSI for the outstanding work you are doing, each and every day, on behalf of your members and for taking on this very important issue.

I also want to offer, on behalf of the officers and members of SEIU, fraternal greetings and solidarity. I want to assure you that Service Employees International Union stands beside you in saying “No!” to racism and xenophobia and “Yes!” to affirmative action.

I have been asked to talk a bit about affirmative action in the U.S. Let me begin by telling you about SEIU to help you understand why affirmative action is an important issue for our union.

WHY AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IS AN ISSUE FOR SEIU

SEIU has its roots in organizing workers that other unions did not want – immigrants, women, and people of color. SEIU was founded in that spirit by workers who decided they needed a union to win social and economic justice.

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Presently, SEIU is the largest and fastest growing union in the U.S. We represent more than 755,000 health care workers, more than 715,000 public sector workers, and more immigrant workers than any other union.

The majority of our members are women and people of color. Women make up 56 percent of our membership. Blacks constitute 15% of our membership; Latinos 13% and Asian Pacific Islanders 4%.

Because we have a vision of improving the lives of working families and building a better society, we have played a leading role in the struggle to secure equal rights for all workers. Our history and makeup demand that we continue to mobilize our members to support affirmative action and other means to break down barriers to equality.

We at SEIU know that racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination just divide workers and make it harder for them to see their common interests. It makes it hard for them to work together to fight domestic policies that enrich the wealthy while plunging working people deeper into economic insecurity.

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At our 2000 convention, SEIU delegates adopted a resolution that reaffirms our commitment to affirmative action.

We in the U.S. have a lot of experience with the issue of affirmative action. We've been trying to get it right for more than 40 years now. We have made a great deal of progress but we still have a long way to go to achieve equity and fairness in our society. I can only hope that Brazil's recent foray into developing race-conscious measures to level the playing field for those who've been shut out of the game have much better results.

Affirmative action in the U.S. grew out of the modern Civil Rights Movement, which demanded an end to segregation, discrimination, and economic exclusion throughout the 1950's and '60s. I am proud to say at the center of the push for economic equality was organized labor – especially African-American leadership like A. Philip Randolph, a fearless and visionary black labor leader.

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A. Philip Randolph organized black trade unionists. He understood that freedom for working people was not solely rooted in economic empowerment, but also political mobilization. It was A. Philip Randolph who recognized that since the participation rate of Blacks in the labor force and in unions was increasing, it made sense for trade unions to be out in front on civil rights.

A. Philip Randolph waged many a battle during his years at the AFL-CIO, demanding inclusion for black workers. As a member of the nation's largest trade union – the Service Employees International Union and a Board member of the A. Philip Randolph Institute – I can tell you that the spirit of A. Philip Randolph lives in those of us who are continuing to be a voice for working people and for racial justice.

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DISPELLING THE MYTHS

It is important to clear up some of the myths and misinformation about affirmative action. In the U.S., affirmative action programs cannot use quotas. It cannot be used to hire or promote unqualified persons, nor is it just an issue for blacks, Latinos and other minority groups. Affirmative action is important for women, too. Recent Census Bureau reports indicate that the median income for full-time working women was 74% of that for men.

Affirmative action is an issue for everyone who supports equality and justice in our society. And, it does not violate union contracts. Job security, seniority, and other contract provisions remain in force under affirmative action programs.

WHY WE HAVE AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

In the U.S., affirmative action started out as a way to address a long, ugly history of segregation and discrimination against black people and grew to include other people of color and women. Affirmative action is about breaking down barriers to equality in hiring, education, and economic access that exist across every sector of society.

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Today's labor movement in the U.S. is incredibly diverse. It includes men and women of all races and nationalities working in solidarity. And unions are at the forefront of the fight for justice for people of color. But it wasn't always that way.

Trade unions in the U.S. have a history of discrimination against people of color and women that mirrors other sectors of the society. Up to the 1970's, entire categories of workers were virtually all-white and all-male. Thousands of police and fire departments, for example, were all white and male. Women and minorities were not even allowed to apply.

For many, many years, African-Americans and other people of color remained locked out of most of labor's craft unions. As late as the mid-1980's, there were still pockets of segregation among some of our union brethren. In 1986, the Supreme Court upheld a 29% minority membership goal for unions found to have intentionally discriminated.

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HISTORY OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

President John F. Kennedy used affirmative action for the first time in 1961, just as the Civil Rights Movement was hitting its stride. At that time, the movement was a coalition that was gaining strength in the fight against racial segregation and discrimination. As the movement started to gain momentum, economic equality became one of its most potent rallying cries.

Under pressure from civil rights leaders, Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925 that instructed federal contractors to take “affirmative action to ensure that applicants are treated equally without regard to race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.”

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 followed and made employment discrimination illegal for large employers. The next year, President Lyndon B. Johnson required all government contractors and subcontractors to take steps to develop job opportunities for minorities.

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Over the next 20 years, federal affirmative action policies expanded to cover women, set goals and timetables to use more women and minority contractors, and set up programs to support business development for minority and women-owned businesses.

But the U.S. has been see-sawing back and forth over affirmative action across the board – from employment to contracting to higher education. There has been tremendous resistance to efforts to forge a more just society. Some minority contracting programs have been struck down, while others have been upheld. The Courts have supported the use of race-conscious hiring policies in some cases and not in others.

During his first term in office, President Clinton reviewed all affirmative action guidelines in federal agencies and said, “Mend it, don’t end it.”

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THE ATTACKS ON AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Despite the obvious benefits of policies that make it illegal to discriminate against people of color, in 1996, a black man in California, Ward Connerly – a man who once benefited from having a small, minority-owned business – pushed through Proposition 209 and got the people of that great state to abolish public-sector affirmative action programs.

In 1998, voters in Washington State passed Initiative 200 that banned affirmative action in higher education, public contracting, and hiring. Two years later, the Florida legislature passed “One Florida” and banned affirmative action.

Earlier this year, President Bush opposed race-conscious programs in higher education – he cynically chose Martin Luther King’s birthday to announce the Justice Department would be filing a brief to oppose the University of Michigan in the Supreme Court. The high court ultimately upheld one of the University’s affirmative action programs, but shut down the other.

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AFIRMATIVE ACTION IS STILL NEEDED

We at SEIU believe that the continued existence of racism, sexism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination in our society demands that the labor movement support programs like affirmative action that foster equity and fairness.

And for those who doubt that discrimination still exists, consider this:

- The Glass Ceiling Commission established under President Bush recently reported that white males continue to hold 97 percent of senior management positions in Fortune 1000 industrial and Fortune 500 service industries. Women hold only 3 to 5 percent of senior level management positions; only 0.6 percent of senior management is African American, 0.3 percent is Asian and 0.4 percent is Hispanic. These are abysmal numbers that don't come close to reflecting the make up of our society. But there's more...

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- The unemployment rate for African Americans was more than twice that of whites in 1994. The median income for black males working full-time, full year in 1992 was 30 percent less than white males and Hispanics fared only a little better in each category.
- Black employment remains fragile. In an economic downturn like we're experiencing right now, black unemployment leads the downward spiral. Hispanic unemployment is also much more cyclical than unemployment for white Americans. Hispanic family income remains much lower, and increases at a slower rate, than white family income.
- Discrimination against Asian Pacific Americans persists, as well: college-educated Asian Pacific Americans on average earn 11% less than their white counterparts, and high school-educated Asian Pacific Americans earn 26% less than their white counterparts.

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Unequal access to education plays an important role in creating and perpetuating economic disparities. In 1993, less than 3 percent of college graduates were unemployed. Now consider this: 22.6 percent of whites had college degrees, but only 12.2 percent of African Americans and 9.0 percent of Hispanics did.

In California and Texas, the elimination of affirmative action programs has had a devastating impact on the number of black, Latino, and Native American students accepted into colleges and universities. For example, in 1996, the entering class of UCLA Law School included 10.3% black students. In 2002, only 1.4% black students entered.

WE NEED TO CONTINUE WORKING TO ELIMINATE DISPARITIES AND ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION

When we see that unemployment rates for African-Americans are double that of whites, then we know that affirmative action is a necessity. When we see that white women earned 75.9 percent as much as white men in 1993, then we know that affirmative action is a necessity. When we see that at the same time, African American men earned only 73.8 percent as much as white men, and African-American

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women – many of whom are single heads of households – earned 65.7 percent, then we know that affirmative action is a necessity.

Our members are faced with a faltering economy, rising unemployment and the worsening state of social systems. We cope with overcrowded schools, a failing health care system, and slashes in funding for other vital services. Meanwhile new tax cuts have given unprecedented advantages to the rich, while increasing the national debt to historic highs.

We can look at education, unemployment, and other indicators and see that discrimination is still the norm, but there are many other disparities in our society that we must address if we are true advocates of social and economic justice.

We cannot ignore the disproportionate number of black males in prison, for example. The incarceration rate for white males was 649 per 100,000, as of June 2002, but for black males it was **4,810** per 100,000.

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Health care is another area of concern. According to a report issued by the Commonwealth Fund, Asian and Hispanic Americans as well as African Americans lag behind whites in nearly every measure of the quality of health care. Despite the fact that African Americans make up just 12 percent of the U.S. population, they reported half of the new HIV infections in 2001.

When it comes to the quality of life where people of color live, environmental justice is a big concern. Nearly 50 percent of African Americans and 60 percent of Hispanics live where air pollution exceeds government standards.

These are all areas that concern SEIU, and in realizing that affirmative action is just the beginning, we have implemented a number of measures and programs that we believe will strengthen our efforts to expand the fight for economic and social justice across the board.

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For many years, SEIU has been working to develop the internal mechanisms to promote social and economic justice within our union and to equip our members to demand social and economic justice. Our constitution mandates that SEIU locals establish Civil and Human Rights Committees. These Committees are useful in encouraging membership participation and in helping local union leaders determine the social and economic justice issues that members care about.

Following our 2000 Convention, SEIU established a Social and Economic Justice Committee under my leadership. The Committee's work is on-going. We will be making a report to our 2005 Convention that will include a number of recommendations to set the pace for our social and economic justice program.

We know that our members can best address their economic and political interests as part of alliances with civil rights and social justice organizations. This is the surest path to building the fair and equitable society we all desire and we will continue to mobilize our members to stand beside others in the fight for equal opportunity.

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We continue to work alongside a number of organizations and groups that promote social and economic justice, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (the N.A.A.C.P.) and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. We encourage our members to participate in the activities and programs of these organizations and others like them.

Within SEIU, we have set up caucuses that provide an outlet for groups of members, such as African Americans, Latinos, retirees, women, people with disabilities, gays and lesbians, and others to have a voice in SEIU governance.

For over 10 years, the caucuses have tackled crucial issues of civil and human rights and fostered solidarity with unions in other countries. They have also shone a light on injustices in North America that SEIU as a whole has striven to overcome. In doing so, they have expanded and deepened the unique SEIU culture of unity in diversity.

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SEIU leadership is committed to doing our best to educate our members on social and economic justice issues from a national and an international perspective. We believe that globalization is a big factor in the growing disparities in our society and we recognize that an effective response to globalization requires an educated membership and a commitment to building solidarity with unions in other countries.

In closing, let me encourage you to continue making affirmative action an issue. Continue to fight for an end to racism, sexism, and xenophobia. And don't ignore your brothers and sisters in the States. I encourage you to continue efforts to build solidarity across borders – solidarity that is not driven just by “bread and butter” issues, but by a genuine commitment to fighting for social and economic justice for all. Let our motto be: An injury to one human being anywhere is an injury to humanity everywhere!

Thank you so much for your time and attention. I look forward to working with you to advance social and economic justice everywhere.