Labor Rights and Southern Civil Rights: The Economics of Equality

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Abstract:

Throughout history, the Labor Rights Movement and Civil Rights Movement have largely been viewed as being ideologically and chronologically separate from one another. Despite this general conception, however, I argue throughout this paper that the goals of both efforts are inherently related to each other. The purpose of this piece is to show that economic equal opportunity is a civil rights issue. Specifically in the Southern United States, the necessity of recognizing the correlation between labor and civil rights is crucial, as class structures continue to permeate society, despite the tremendous progress activists gained throughout the 60s and beyond.

In order to demonstrate this argument, this paper will firstly take a look into the nature of both movements as being independent from one another but also having similar objectives. When observing evidence that is often glossed over in history courses, it becomes clear that the civil rights movement had mostly consisted of a middle class militia, a reality that was both detrimental and beneficial in some ways to the efficacy of the cause. While there were labor groups connected to the Civil Rights Movement, they tended to focus primarily on white working class communities; while some campaigns in Civil Rights Movement focused on improving economic or employment prospects for people of color, civil rights groups tended to focus more on political and social segregation. This paper will examine a number of cases throughout the Southern Civil Rights Movement and Labor Rights movements when activists from both movements cooperated on successful campaigns, such as in the instance of Memphis sanitation worker Strike, when fair labor standards were seen as a human right.

In the second half, I will continue to argue for the importance of recognizing fair and equal economic opportunity as a civil right by offering evidence that Hispanic workers in the Southern half of the United States now face a similar struggle to that of black workers in the late 20th century. I will show that migrant workers are being exposed to same issues of structural racism that preclude their success within the labor market and limit them to a never-ending cycle of poverty and societal exclusion.

Foreword

I was both fortunate and unlucky in some ways to have grown up in Jackson, Mississippi as the youngest child of an Indian immigrant family. In one respect, I spent the majority of my childhood being exposed to the overt racism, which continues to affect Southern society. As early as fourth grade, I can remember being told by an elementary school teacher that my soul was in jeopardy because my family believed in a different religion and came from a different culture. Mothers would find excuses for their white children to not spend time or talk with me. Fellow students would follow orders from their grandparents to not play at recess with the Indian girl. While these types of experiences were traumatic and shaping, they never succeeded in coloring my overall opinion of the South and Mississippi, in particular.

Amidst the obvious flaws that the South carries, there's also the reality that it would not be so special, quirky, and unique without having gone through such a terrible history. As I grew older, I began to appreciate some remarkable qualities of the South, such as southern hospitality, the incredible food, the soulful blues music and jazz. Above all, however, I grew to really love the history, mostly because I felt like I was apart of it. As a member of a lower income immigrant, minority group family, I directly benefitted from the amazing work of leaders during the Civil Rights and Labor Rights Movements. It has been incredible to be surrounded by people like James Meredith, the first African American to go to college in Mississippi, Myrlie Evers-Williams, the wife of the man who single-handedly changed Jackson society, and many others. Growing up in Jackson opened my mind to the strength of activism and the importance of speaking out.

My perspective as I researched for this paper is the product of my own experiences, conversations with my parents about immigration and their past, my fascination with labor and

civil rights, and my decision as I grew up to rise above the remaining elements of prejudice in Mississippi. I am eager to add to the pile of scholarly research on the importance of continuing the struggle for equal rights. I hope that millennials will continue to work toward making the South the kind of place it ought to be and call upon activists to fortify a culture of acceptance and equality, not only with minority groups, but also the overall community.

Introduction

The struggle for economic equal opportunity closely aligned itself with race equality well before the Civil Rights Movement took off during the 60s. At the same time that blacks were being forced to live within a segregated society, denied access to basic public services, and granted few rights to political participation, they were also being thrust into a never-ending cycle of poverty that had been enforced by a pre-existing and state supported class structure. Institutional racism permeated society to its core, such that every aspect of the black individual's life was being determined by white elitism, even in the workforce. The rhetoric and mentality of the plantation lifestyle manifested itself in humiliatingly low wages for black workers, working conditions that were often unsafe and deadly, and unequal access to employment opportunities (and even those employment opportunities were limited to unskilled labor), all of which formed another type of economic dependency that helped oppressors maintain the type of society they wanted.

All throughout the Deep South there were cases of towns with two radically different standards of living. On one side there would exist "a white middle class, well-fed, reasonably prosperous, contented…living in modern, well appointed houses," while the other side would consist of "mostly unskilled laborers who were kept apart, confined to one section…in

unsanitary, crowded housing fronting unsealed roads, lacking plumbing, exploited at the workplace, [and] working long hours at minimal rates of pay."[1] Even those who would volunteer to fight against this type of injustice would have to deal with "forces arrayed against them," such as the "the town councils, mayors, the local law enforcement officers, [and] the police chiefs."[2] Those who "challenged the social order" were often "shot by those sworn to uphold the law."[3]

With limited access to sound educational institutions, children of those living in segregated communities would be taught from a young age to accept a "badge of inferiority." They were brought up to understand the unfortunate reality of their situation—being "exploited, controlled [and] kept in their place"[4] by a culture that nurtured an objectifying caste system. Due to limited economic opportunities, families were often unable to afford a quality education for their children. Subsequently, children were often incapable of escaping this type of cruel indoctrination. As parents were losing faith in the possibility of a brighter, more equal future for their children, it became apparent, not only to activists but also within the larger community, that some sort of collective response was necessary.

It was evident to activists that economic factors and racial tensions were and still are intertwined within one another. Because the plight of the urban poor was not the overarching focus of Civil Rights Movement, the Labor Rights Movement was instrumental in bridging the divide. The combination of both movements was essential, because it allowed for marginalized unskilled laborers of all races to be given a voice and a platform for meaningful change. It is also clear that the multifaceted nature of the Southern class struggle could not have possibly been addressed on a single front.

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[1] Salmond, John A. Southern Struggles: The Southern Labor Movement and the Civil Rights Struggle. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. Pg 1.
[2] Ibid Pg 2.
[3] Ibid Pg 3.
[4] Ibid Pg 1.

This paper will explain that the convergence of ideals, coordination, and cooperation for both movements, as well as the acknowledgement of economic equal opportunity as a civil right, resulted in the most progress for the black community in achieving overall equality. Despite the tremendous success of both these movements in promoting change throughout the late 20th century, it is clear especially in the South that there is still a great deal of work to be done. A new economic class structure has emerged within the Hispanic community of migrant workers, who are often left with no other options but to work in low-income sector jobs.

While there are obvious differences between the struggle of black workers in the 60s and migrant workers in recent decades, there are also several important similarities that deserve more attention. The reality of working conditions for Hispanic workers is ensconced within the façade of modern day notions of equality. A whole village of workers may live in abject poverty, experience horrific labor conditions, and even be subjected to abuse on the job. Meanwhile, a brick walled suburban town may flourish only a few miles away. This paper will examine several cases from the past and present of the relationship between the Civil Rights Movement and Labor Rights Movement, the struggle for economic equal opportunity, and racial tensions. In the final section of the paper, the reader will be able to take a look at the role of Hispanic workers in the South. The research will conclude with a call to activists, who must to continue the fight against an old class system that has found ways to reinvent earlier forms of oppression.

Justice

Southern Civil Rights Movement

After the abolition of slavery and the launch of Reconstruction in the late 19th century, the remaining blacks that lived within the Deep South faced an incredible degree of oppression. Despite the presence of military pressure, a confederate mentality continued to dominate Southern society allowing white elites to "reinstate [African Americans'] status as an underclass, as lowly as the slaves their parents had been," through means of "racial and sexual violence, economic oppression, denial of voting rights, and other inequities and humiliations."[5] The core of the Southern Civil Rights Movement was grounded in the democratic grounds on which the United States was founded," civic activism against Jim Crow segregation, and the "moral values [that were being] preached … at churches, synagogues, and mosques."[6]

Although the North faced its own problems with racism, segregation operated mostly through "long-established patterns of discriminatory restrictions on black American access to opportunities, goods and services, and public institutions."[7] Under this type of de facto segregation, it was considered "normal" to push blacks into lower-income neighborhoods that prevented them from getting equal access to opportunity. In the South, segregation operated through the law, "the ever-present threat of violence and official, state-sanctioned disparate and unequal treatment," and of course, absolute enforcement of *Plessy v. Ferguson (1896),* which legitimized separation of blacks and whites in public spaces. [8]

It was not until the pivotal *Brown v. Board of Education* case of 1954 that the Supreme Court recognized the illegitimacy of a separate but equal framework for constitutional rights. By

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[5] Ezra, Michael. *Civil Rights Movement: People and Perspectives*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009. *EBSCO*. ABC-CLIO, Inc. Web. 17 Aug. 2014. Pg. 59.
[6] Ibid Pg. 60.
[7] Ibid Pg 1.
[8] Ibid Pg.2.

the time of that decision, however, the campaign for equal civil rights had already been heavily "propelled" by two factors: "rising expectations and decreasing patience."[9] Blacks that had fought during World War II resented the unfair treatment they faced when they returned back home. The migration of blacks into the North, as well, facilitated a greater degree of activism among those in the South. Many blacks had succeeded in going so far as electing representatives to office. They had been granted greater political participation, allowing them to enhance their lifestyles. In the South, however, the threat of cruel violence and harassment prevented most from even speaking out. This institutional oppression manifested itself in greater activism among Southern blacks, as well as two events that played a major role in accelerating Civil Rights Movement activism for many people: the murder of a young African American boy, Emmett Till, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott.[10]

What is often ignored when considering the Southern Civil Rights Movement is the unintentional class structure that existed within the movement itself. While it certainly had foundations in the working class struggles of the 1930s and 1940s, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was led primarily by a middle class militia of "black ministers, teachers, and especially students."[11] These activists could afford the time commitment of the struggle, especially given the smaller, but significant, degree of financial security they had. In 1950s and 1960s the plight of the urban poor was not so much of a focus (with exceptions like King's March on Washington) as was greater access to political participation, voting rights, and eradicating remaining elements of segregationist ideology.

In reality, the Civil Rights Movement appeared to have had its most fundamental roots in

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[9] Ibid Pg. 10.
[10] Ibid Pg. 12
[11] Harrison, Daniel M. and Larry W. Isaac. 2012. Civil Rights Movement," Pp. 80-85 in The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Vol. 20: Social Class, edited by Larry J. Griffin & Peggy G. Hargis. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. Pg. 3

the pre-Civil War class struggles that had already existed for years. After being defeated by the North, Southern society was thrown into complete chaos. Reconstruction had jeopardized the system that rich white elites had developed to subordinate poorer individuals. For the white elite, it was just as important to undermine the social mobility of blacks, as it was to keep poor whites from being able to gain more wealth and power.[12] Soon a new social order emerged, one that was more grounded in race, than in economic status. Although there was a sort of camaraderie between poor white and black workers against the landowning class (especially given the greater economic burden of living in the South post- Civil War), a new social order, nonetheless, emerged. This social order was enforced by the white bourgeois, which felt threatened by any hint of collective and coordinated efforts between black workers, white farmers, and the government.

As Jack Bloom explains in his book *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement*, while the Southern Civil Rights Movement's foundation lay within the socioeconomic struggles, it mostly confronted "the denial of political rights to blacks, forced segregation, and the degradation of blacks to second-class citizenship."[13] The target audience for the Civil Rights Movement's message was the middle class, including both activists and the less engaged members of the community. A rising middle class of black and even formerly poor white workers was pushing aside the agrarian elite of white plantation owners throughout the 1960s. What the Civil Rights Movement addressed, however, was not this economic reality, but rather the racist policies that had been created post-Reconstruction to subordinate and keep the poor blacks from participating in society.

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[12] Bloom, Jack M. Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987. Google Books. Web. 24 Feb. 2015. Pg. 19.
[13] Ibid Pg 2.

Iconic civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. is shown speaking to a church congregation in 1956.[14]

Ultimately, the Civil Rights Movement won major advances toward race equality by means of a "social revolution." Through this transformation, political power was transferred from "rural and small town cliques to the business and middle classes within the cities."[15] As a result, new centers of power developed that did not have the same "vested interest" in maintaining the racist practices of the Antebellum South.[16] With this change came legislation like the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the desegregation of schools and colleges, and the election of more African Americans to office, among other achievements. Due to the nature of the transition and the emphasis on the middle class, however, the needs of lower class of black workers were not fully addressed by the Civil Rights Movement.

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[14] *Martin Luther King, Jr. Speaking in Church during the Montgomery Bus Boycott.* 1956. Photograph. Columbia University, New York. Amistad Digital Resource. By Dan Weiner. Web. 3 June 2015. <http://www.amistadresource.org/civil_rights_era/archives/image_archive.html>.
[15] Bloom Pg. 2.
[16] Ibid.

Labor Rights Movement

The South is a jackpot for scholarly literature, media, and historical papers on the black struggle for equality. The Labor Rights Movement, however, is often forgotten, ignored, or even brushed over in most high school American history courses. I, for example, never even touched the subject of labor rights throughout my advanced history courses, let alone considered labor's importance when discussing Martin Luther King's legacy. Indeed, the words "unions" and "organized labor" seemed taboo in states like Mississippi where citizens, in the Nissan plant for instance, are still struggling to practice the most basic worker right - collective bargaining.[17] Despite, the lack of attention for this pivotal movement, labor rights have had a tremendous impact on the development of the South, the success of the Civil Rights Movement, and Congress's interest in passing more equal opportunity legislation, such as Lyndon B. Johnson's Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.

Even Martin Luther King, who is often remembered as a civil rights activist, was a major labor rights figure, who worked heavily against the AFL-CIO's tolerance for the exclusions of black workers from unions. In his speech to the AFL-CIO Fourth Constitutional Convention in 1961 he encouraged the crowd to remember that, "labor should accept the logic of its special position with respect to Negroes and the struggle for equality."[18] He saw a connection between civil rights, such as the right to vote, and social mobility, like equal access to employment and fair wages, that would grant blacks the opportunity to rise above institutionalized poverty. He argued that "the two most dynamic and cohesive liberal forces in the country [were] the labor

[17] Thomas-Tisdale, Alice. "Nissan Workers Ready for UAW to Show Them the Upside of Collective Bargaining." *Jackson Advocate*. The Jackson Advocate Newspaper, Inc., n.d. Web. 24 Feb. 2015.
[18] King, Martin Luther, and Michael K. Honey. "*All Labor Has Dignity*" Boston, MA: Beacon, 2011. *Google Books*. Web. 24 Feb. 2015. Chapter 4.

movement and the Negro freedom movement."[19] Indeed, history courses often gloss over this critical aspect of King's campaign, which was his struggle to make "racial and economic justice a reality."[20]

Black commuters are displayed walking long distances to get to work during the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956.[21]

The legislation of the New Deal Era, which kick-started the labor rights campaign, was largely ineffective or ignored in the South. As Michael Honey points out, "most industrial workers…in the South lacked basic rights to organize, speak out, and to bargain collectively," such that "unionism for many became a kind of freedom movement."[22] In reality, labor rights

[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] *Walking to Work, 1956*. 1956. Photograph. Columbia University, New York. Amistad Digital Resource. By Don Cravens. Web. 3 June 2015. <http://www.amistadresource.org/civil_rights_era/archives/image_archive.html>.
[22] Honey, Michael K. Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers. Urbana: U of Illinois, 1993. Google Books. Web Pg. 68.

were a critical issue, especially in the South, because the union movement was essential to breaking down the "the repressive social system inherited from slavery and enforced by segregation."[23] The mutual interests of fair wages and greater access to employment in many ways united both poor white and black workers in the agricultural industry, especially because the Wagner Act of 1935 did not guarantee farm workers any rights to organize. Activists realized that racial divisions would counter any efforts at creating fair working conditions. For this reason, the Labor Rights Movement in the South was key to dismantling the segregationist attitude.

Despite the correlation between equal opportunity and labor rights, it was very difficult for workers to organize in the South. After the passage of the Wagner Act, a surge of labor activism occurred all throughout the country, and it led to a number of successes. In the South, however, progress was often undermined by the failure of unions to adequately recognize the relationship between race and worker rights. Throughout the 30s and 40s, organizers missed several opportunities to form interracial unions due to "equivocation" or, even worse, "capitulation to white racism, organizing strategies that played to labor's weakness among whites instead of its strengths among blacks, and a purge of Communists that deprived unions of the bravest, most committed activists."[24]

Indeed, all throughout the South, core issues of race often prevented any formative progress in the union movement. Interracial unions, which were absolutely necessary in the war on poverty, for instance, were most likely to form if whites and blacks did "similar work and Negroes [were] potentially or actually a large part of the workforce."[25] If blacks formed a

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[23] Ibid.
[24] Draper, Alan. Conflict of Interests: Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement in the South, 1954-1968. Ithaca, NY: ILR, 1994. Google Books. Web. 2 May 2014. Pg. 10.
[25] Ibid.

minority in the workforce or were not absolutely critical to the efficiency of the production process, however, "southern whites preferred Jim Crow locals." As a result, intervention on the part of an international union, an event that was unlikely, was necessary to override the majority.[26] Historians, therefore, often criticize unions for having a mistaken strategy because it often defaulted to southern white preferences and not to the strength and manpower of the black worker movement.

Another weakness of the labor rights movement was the failure to immediately recognize the conservative politics of the Democratic Party in the South. The AFL-CIO's efforts were often blocked by the South's ability to "impede reform within the Democratic Party and its contribution to the conservative coalition in Congress."[27] For this reason, union activists started to appreciate the impact the Civil Rights Movement could have on labor rights. It seemed that the only way unions could pass critical legislation was by challenging the core, prejudicial, and racist problems that were inherent within Southern society. Through black enfranchisement, for example, blacks would be able to bolster and reconfigure a more liberalized Democratic party that could support the interests of all people in the working class. Moreover, the South would cease to operate under a one-party system; rather, it would turn into two-party system, through which liberal labor activists could more effectively challenge the remaining elements of white conservatism. This fact was one of the many factors that ultimately bridged the divide between both the Civil Rights Movement and Labor Rights Movement.

Unfortunately, it would take a long time before the majority of union leaders would be able to embrace the efforts of civil rights activists. As Alan Draper writes in his book on the conflict between labor and civil rights, "labor leaders believed that conservative anti-labor

[26] Ibid Pg. 12
[27] Ibid Pg. 13

groups cynically used race as a ruse," and as a result, "these officials dismissed the rank and file's response to civil rights as irrational or credulous."[28] Labor leaders, who were often white, could not really look beyond the political benefits of the civil rights movement in its ability to restructure the Democratic Party. This lack of collaboration and mutual understanding was a burden to both movements.

[28] Ibid Pg. 15

Convergence: Memphis, economic equal opportunity, and human rights

Like the Civil Rights Movement, the Labor Rights Movement tended to target a very specific audience. Labor rights activists primarily focused on lower-income working class groups of people. In spite of some opposition within the movement, the Labor Rights Movement still found success in organizing black communities as well. The black workers who were most affected by efforts of the Labor Rights Movement were those who had been cornered into menial labor jobs, like sanitation work, janitorial positions, or unskilled construction. The coalition of middle class reverends, teachers, and students, who had formed the base for the Civil Rights Movement, benefitted from labor rights efforts, but not so much as other workers. Because both movements targeted different groups, it was even more imperative that activists unite together in order to achieve overall change and progress.

The Memphis public sanitation workers' strike is an example in which both civil rights and labor rights campaigns came together and achieved more success than if they had operated on separate fronts. This case study on the one hand demonstrates the relationship between the labor and race divisions and how, when activists work together, the weaknesses in both movements can be supported by their complementary strengths. On the other hand, it also reveals how economic equal opportunity and fair labor standards are not only related to civil rights but are in themselves a type of civil right that deserves official recognition. The plight of the Memphis sanitation workers, which rose up against the societal order of that time, shows how debilitating working conditions are an affront against basic human rights.

This photograph from 1968 depicts the Memphis Sanitation Worker Strike. National Guard Members look on, ready in case violence breaks out. This strike was a pivotal moment in the workers' efforts to achieve greater equality on the job.[29]

Memphis: 1968

Memphis lives in the heart of the South. With its reputation for blues music, its roots in the Mississippi Delta, and its aromatic yet artery-clogging soul food, it comes as no surprise that Memphis constitutes one of the key cities in this region of the United States. Furthermore, it is not surprising, that of all the cities in the South, it was one of the last to move toward developing a more equal societal structure. About 58% of Memphis's black families lived below the poverty line at during the 60s, according to Honey. And, this figure was "10 percent above the national average and almost four times the rate of poverty among Memphis white families."[30] Blacks living in Memphis were more prone to a variety of diseases, like diabetes and high blood

[29] *Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike. 1968*. Photograph. Walter P. Reuther Library, Detroit. Walter P. Reuther Library. Web. 3 June 2015. <https://reuther.wayne.edu/node/811>. Photographer is unknown.
[30] Honey, Michael K. Going down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007. Print. Pg. 3.

pressure, were denied access to educational resources that would have been necessary for entry into higher paying jobs, and often suffered from unjust imprisonment. Sanitation workers, the majority of whom were black, were paid so little for their work that they still qualified for welfare even after a forty-hour week.[31]

Memphis Public Works employees faced terrible working conditions. Henry Loeb, the mayor of Memphis in '68, had cut costs on public services at the expense of the public workers. Honey wrote about the environment these employees faced: they often had to work late into night, were required to return in the morning for another day on the job, and wouldn't be given a cent of overtime pay. Resources and money were also limited. If a vehicle suddenly broke down, workers would have to endanger their lives by taking shelter under the faulty equipment until it could be removed from the streets. Even worse, if an employee were fired or killed on the job, a new worker wouldn't replace him. Instead current employees would have to work extra without compensation.[32]

When two sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were killed on the job, due to the lack of safety regulations, poor equipment, and unsanitary and unsafe working conditions, public works employees decided to speak out against the city's lack of action. Although the city provided a voluntary life insurance policy worth $2,000, neither of these men could have afforded to purchase it. In the end, both of their families were given meager compensation for their loved ones' deaths, about 500 dollars and a month's salary, most of which was used for burial fees. The incident bolstered workers' frustration with Loeb and his discriminatory policies. They resented the fact that most white workers were granted better equipment, more pay, and better treatment, while black workers were given dangerous and faulty machinery. They also

[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid Pg. 70

were enraged by the lack of funds given to the destitute families of the workers.

On February 13, 1968 several years after the sanitation workers had begun efforts to develop an American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees local union, the deaths of the Cole and Walker and the city's response to those deaths galvanized the workers to rally together for a walkout strike. Many consider this strike to be a "peak" in the "connection between civil rights and labor activism."[33] By this time the Civil Rights Movement had established its power and won several major victories. Freedom rides, marches against segregation, and pivotal legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had already come to characterize the decade. However, there was an understanding that "formal legal equality would remain an abstraction without decent pay and safe working conditions."[34] Workers, in an effort to garner the most support, appealed to Memphis's "substantial middle-class and professional communities," as well as the national AFSCME, which ultimately granted more than $500,000 to the workers' cause.[35]

The February 13th strike was similar to other civil rights demonstrations. For instance, unionists called upon national civil rights supporters and clergymen to meet with Mayor Henry Loeb when Loeb refused to meet with worker representatives. Martin Luther King lent his support to the cause and linked the "sanitation workers' struggle to the ongoing southern freedom struggle."[36] King joined a labor-civil rights coalition in Memphis and promised to lead a few of the protest marches, which he did on March 28 and April 3. On April 4, as he was getting ready for another march to be held the next day, King was shot to death at the Lorraine Motel. However, King, while he was active in Memphis, had used the sanitation worker strike as the

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[33] Zieger, Robert H. *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America since 1865*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007. Accessed October 28, 2014. Google Books. Pg. 190.
[34] Ibid Pg. 193.
[35] Ibid Pg. 194
[36] Ibid Pg. 194

starting point for his Poor People's Campaign, his project to ameliorate "the problems of the country's poor, regardless of racial identity."[37]

King gives a speech to an audience in Memphis during the Sanitation Worker strike.[38]

In the late 1960s the main targets of King's campaign were the "legal and political obstacles to the exercise of civil rights by blacks," which came in the form of "underlying poverty, unemployment, lack of education, and blocked avenues of economic opportunity" for

[37] Little, Kimberly K. *You Must Be from the North: Southern White Women in the Memphis Civil Rights Movement*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009. Accessed October 28, 2014. Google Books. Pg. 4.
[38] Withers, Ernest C. *King Speaks in Memphis.* 1968. Photograph. Walter P. Reuther Library, Detroit. Walter P. Reuther Library. Web. 3 June 2015. <https://reuther.wayne.edu/node/3632>.

African Americans.[39] The worker strike was the culmination of these efforts. As the demonstrations grew, increased support from organizations like Community on the Move for Equality developed.[40] Such organizations would establish "food and clothing banks in churches, [take] up collections for strikers to meet rent and mortgages, and [recruit] marchers for frequent demonstrations."[41]Even in other aspects of the protest, civil rights leaders would play a heavy role. For instance, King's plans to promote a citywide boycott for workers included the leadership of Reverend James Lawson, "a seasoned veteran of the civil rights movement and an experienced trainer of activists in the philosophy and methods of nonviolent resistance."[42]

On April 16th the workers, with the support of both civil rights and labor rights activists, were able to reach a settlement with the city in which nearly all of their demands were met. Not only did the council agree to recognize the union that the sanitation workers wanted to form, but it also guaranteed that the workers would receive better wages. In the decade before the Memphis sanitation worker strike had occurred, "organized labor, as a whole, had failed to grasp the strategic significance of the growing civil rights movement."[43] During this time, only a few unions, such as the "District 65 of the Distributive Workers of America and the Local 1199 of the National Union of Health and Hospital Workers," recognized the importance of building a coalition with the Civil Rights Movement.[44] The AFL-CIO, in fact, supported the initiatives of the civil rights movement but "avoided linking itself to the movement."[45] It was not until the mid-60s, that the interconnectedness of the two movements was recognized. Many would argue

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[39] "Martin Luther King, Jr., and Memphis Sanitation Workers." National Archives and Records Administration. National Archives and Records Administration, n.d. Web. 22 Feb. 2015.
[40] Ibid
[41] Ibid
[42] Ibid
[43] Fletcher, Bill, and Fernando Gapasin. *Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path toward Social Justice*. Berkeley: U of California, 2008. *Google Books*. Web. 24 Feb. 2015. Pg. 35.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.

that Martin Luther King's role in the Memphis strike, where he linked the sanitation workers' individual rights to their demands for economic equal opportunity and protection on the job, provided the momentum for future progress by activists in both labor and civil rights movements.

Moving Forward: Post Memphis

Throughout the postwar period, African American workers made major employment gains, working their way into previously all-white industries. Minority membership increased in unions, especially those unions that "stressed the connection between the civil rights movement and the efforts of low-skilled, poorly paid minority workers," and fought for members to "gain both tangible improvements and greater respect on the job."[46] Although the civil rights-labor connection was "fragile" at the time, the joint efforts of labor and civil rights activists largely contributed to the changing "demographic profile of the southern working class."[47] The pivotal Civil Rights Act of 1964, for instance, outlawed race discrimination in employment, and it had dramatic impacts on southern industries. Black employment in textile mills, for example, grew from "5 percent of production workers to nearly 25 percent." African Americans gained even greater consideration in the hiring process through the establishment of "affirmative action."[48] By the end of the century, it seemed that the "American labor movement" had moved toward "ever-increasing degrees of acceptance and even cultivation" for black laborers.[49]

During the 1970s, African American membership in worker unions grew tremendously.

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[46] Wilson, Charles Reagan., James G. Thomas, and Ann J. Abadie. The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2006. Google Books. Web. 24 Feb. 2015.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Zieger, Robert H. *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America since 1865*. Lexington: U of Kentucky, 2007. *Google Books*. Web. 24 Feb. 2015. Pgs. 170-9.
[49] Wilson, James, et al.

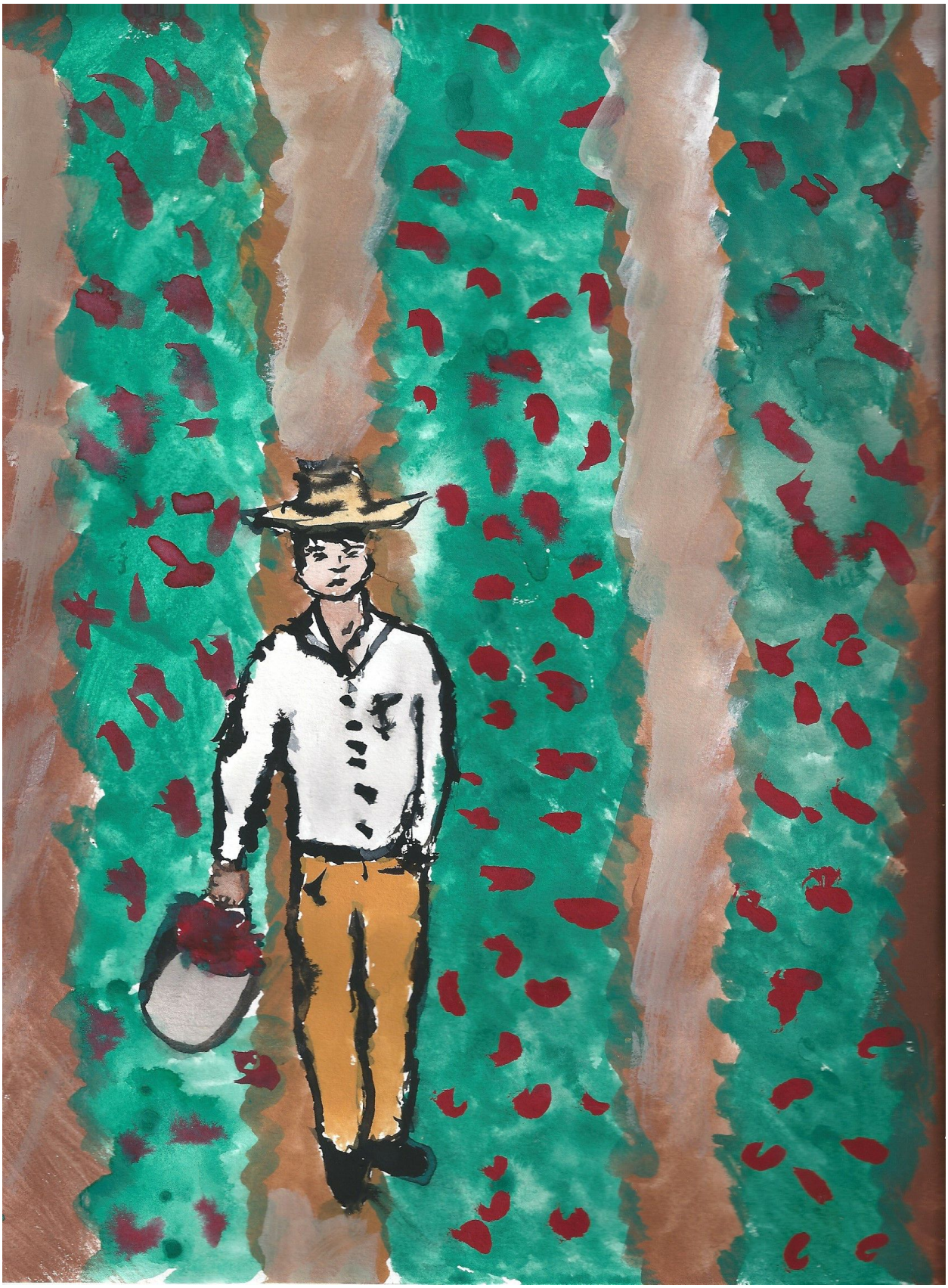
Although the U.S. labor movement had decreased its momentum, with fewer instances of strike activity, "organization among public employees surged." Black public employees, in areas of sanitation, janitorial, and hospital positions, helped bring economic equity to the "forefront of the struggle for civil rights." Other social reforms, as well, offered employment to nearly fifteen thousand African Americans, such as "the expansion of Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, and the launching of Head Start."[50] Moreover, a number of Supreme Court cases during this time period outlawed hiring procedures that "disproportionately harmed black workers, regardless of their intent." These cases showed that the federal government's efforts to take into account the demands of the Black Freedom Movement, beyond just the Civil Rights Act.[51]

However, African Americans still faced issues with unequal access to economic opportunity and unfair treatment on the job. While greater numbers of blacks were added to the federal payroll after the 1970s, the federal government was unable to fully eradicate "racial discrimination in job hiring," due to the "long term trends" that had come out of the "vagaries of history." Indeed, even the most "determined labor activists" could not break through the late 20th century "worksites that recalled systems of bound labor."[52] Subsequently, old trends manifested in new practices, such as "racist office and shop-floor work cultures, and the failure of white supervisors to promote black employees." A number of social indicators showed the hold that "generations-old systems of racial oppression" had on American society.[53] For instance, in the 1990s, nearly "half of all black children" lived in households that fell below the poverty line, whereas only 16 percent of white children fell under the poverty line. Moreover, current

[50] Jones, Jacqueline. American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998. Google Books. Web. 24 Feb. 2015. Pg. 361.
[51] Ibid Pg 362.
[52] Ibid Pg 370.
[53] Ibid Pg 372.

statistics do not shed a positive light on the black-white socioeconomic gap either. According to the Pew Research Center, the unemployment rate for blacks "is about double that among whites, as it has been for most of the past six decades."[54] While the efforts of labor and civil rights activists significantly improved the prospects for blacks in America, there is still much to be done, as promotion and work practices demonstrate that employers continue to turn a blind eye to race discrimination.

[54] Desilver, Drew. "Black Unemployment Rate Is Consistently Twice That of Whites." Pew Research Center RSS. Pew Research Center, 21 Aug. 2013. Web. 19 Feb. 2015.



The Struggle Continues: Hispanic Immigrants in the South

Toward the turn of the 20th century, the demographic profile of the American political economy changed dramatically with rise in immigration, especially from Central America. Labor discrimination, despite the number of legal initiatives that have been passed to protect workers' rights, is still a major issue. Employers now feel less compelled to abide by legal labor practices when there is such a large pool of cheap labor available among multi-racial communities in the United States. For instance, employers in the South, a region which offers a "surplus of illegal aliens…or inner-city blacks and Hispanics," often take advantage of the willingness of immigrant laborers to "work long hours for low wages."[55] With this trend, a new host of civil rights and labor rights issues have arisen, and "African Americans… found that they were not alone" in the "lowest echelons of the workforce."[56] Immigrants without papers lack the legal protections they need to ensure that they are offered a safe working environment and are properly compensated for their time. As a result, they have often been exposed to a number of human rights violations, particularly in the South, where race discrimination has justified "labor systems that assign certain groups to certain kinds of jobs."[57]

Even as court cases toward the end of the 20th century seemingly began to "chip away at overtly discriminatory…policies," industries began turning to "Latin American and Southeast Asian refugees" for their "labor-intensive" work. [58] By 1995, Hispanic Americans nearly took over African Americans for the country's largest minority group, and, at the same time, the "black-white racial division of labor gave way," while "time-honored tactics of prejudice" were

[55] Jones Pg 370.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid Pg 20.
[58] Ibid Pg 370.

able to continue. [59] Employers for the lowest tier of jobs, those that were "low-status, low-paying, and often highly exploitative," targeted their recruitment towards immigrant groups they believed were "particularly nimble with their fingers, accommodating in their demeanor, and vulnerable in their legal or political status."[60] Immigrants became the new source of labor for low-skill jobs. Agribusinesses, many of which are situated in the South, continued to hire "a quarter of a million undocumented workers," despite the nation's "growing outcry over illegal immigration."[61] Jacqueline Jones, author of a book on American labor, gives an example of an immigrant from California's strawberry fields, who said, "They use us all year as slaves."[62] Southern states, once the center for "black-white dyads," now "acknowledge[s]" but does not "necessarily embrace" multi-ethnicity.[63]

A number of stories have surfaced, recounting the "horrific conditions" that immigrants have endured, including "cramped quarters" in sweatshops and "child labor on truck farms in fruit orchards."[64] While the plight of immigrants is distinct from the centuries of cruelty that African Americans endured in the United States, there are some comparisons that can be drawn in the way that American labor has treated the more vulnerable minority groups in the country. Just as blacks incited a "a whole host of fears" for "native-born whites," that resented competition in the labor market after emancipation and especially after Civil Rights Act, immigrants now serve as yet another public enemy. All the debate over "affirmative action policies" have shown how stagnant the political rhetoric, which "originated to justify a 'racial'

[59] Ibid Pg 372.
[60] Ibid Pg 75.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid Pg 375.
[63] Ibid Pg 75.
[64] Ibid Pg 76.

division of labor," truly is.[65]

Drawing Comparisons: The American Labor movement for Mexican Americans

There is no form of oppression in the United States' domestic history that compares to the slavery of African Americans. However, there are also a number of ethnic groups that have struggled within the American labor market for being a part of what industries might consider a "vulnerable minority group." When examining case studies of different states, where cheap labor is in high demand, a number of parallels can be drawn between the types of oppressive tactics that are used to subordinate blacks and the ones that are have been and are still used to take advantage of Mexican Americans. The struggle of Mexican Americans in fighting for their labor rights as civil rights is similar to what African Americans grappled with during the 1970s, and many of the same conditions are comparable to the issues that launched the Memphis Sanitation Worker Strike. What the following studies will demonstrate, as did the Memphis Strike, is that the Labor Rights Movement and Civil Rights Movement share a common goal, and activists achieve success by recognizing the inherent importance of economic equal opportunity and fair treatment on the job in the civil rights struggle. The evidence will demonstrate not only that there is still much to be done in ensuring equal treatment of all Americans but also that the fight must continue—labor rights and civil rights activists need to work together in order to address the socioeconomic gap between whites and minority groups in the United States.

A Short History

It was during the Great Depression that Mexican Americans, facing increasingly

[65] Ibid Pg 386.

narrowed options and few benefits from assistance programs, began organizing for their rights. The New Deal era "inspired Mexican farm workers to organize," because they believed that new legislation would protect them against employers that wanted a subservient labor force. Unfortunately, Southern Dixiecrats altered the New Deal legislation so that agricultural and domestic workers wouldn't be able to organize or take advantage of collective bargaining. Moreover, in 1938, farm workers were excluded from the protections of the Fair Labor Standards Act, and the federal government "failed to recognize the farm worker unions." Subsequently, growers took advantage of the legal loopholes by exploiting farmworkers' lack of protection and often colluding with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, such that "deportation" became "an advantage held in reserve until needed" by employers. Even worse, the AFL-CIO ultimately rejected the participation of Mexican workers in American unions, which reinforced racially segregated divisions in the American workforce.[66]

The institutional framework that resulted from New Deal legislation and the exclusionary practices of the CIO set the stage for the systemic exploitation of Mexican Americans, who have often been "relegated to the worst unskilled and semiskilled positions."[67]At the same time, the postwar years also served as a turning point in Mexican American grassroots movements. During this time period, a greater number of grassroots movements also emerged that were targeted toward "working for greater Mexican American participation in the political process."[68] New legislation that subordinated vulnerable minority groups was passed, and the civil rights movement for Mexican American workers emerged in response. This fact demonstrates that many farm workers were able to find a way to protect their human rights without any legal

[66] Vargas, Zaragosa. Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-century America. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005. Google Books. Web. Pg. 5-9.
[67] Ibid Pg 14.
[68] Ibid Pg 15.

protections from the government, another chapter in the long history of solidarity movements.

Florida: Coalition of Immokalee Workers

Florida supplies about one-third of the United States' tomato supply; between the months of October and June, Florida supplies nearly all of the country's tomatoes. While such statistics may demonstrate the state's talent for growing tomatoes, "fresh tomatoes fall at or near the bottom in rankings of consumer satisfaction," in the United States.[69] The cause of such dissatisfaction can be accredited to the industrialization of tomato farms, to the point where the product, which is cheaply produced, is "as bereft of nutrition as [it is] of flavor." In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture tomatoes that are produced today are substantially more deficient in vital vitamins than those that were produced in the 1960s. Florida's tomato fields, it turns out, violate "all elements of sustainability," and only produce a product by pumping the "soil full of chemical fertilizers" as well as "more than one hundred different herbicides and pesticides."[70]

Unfortunately, workers in the tomato fields bear the burden of these horrific environmental conditions. The toll that workers face is staggering, and it is the result of the poor circumstances in which the tomatoes are grown. For instance, the chemicals that tomato pickers are exposed to on a daily basis lead to "eye and respiratory ailments, exposure to known carcinogens, and babies born with horrendous birth defects."[71] The number of abuses and the mistreatment that workers face in the fields, however, runs much deeper than just exposure to chemicals.

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[69] Estabrook, Barry. Tomatoland: How Modern Industrial Agriculture Destroyed Our Most Alluring Fruit. N.p.: Andrews McMeel, 2011. Google Books. Web. 24 Feb. 2015. Pg. xiv.
[70] Ibid xvii.
[71] Ibid.

Farmers hire mostly Hispanic immigrants that lack "union protection" and are incapable of legally protecting their rights to overtime pay, benefits, or medical insurance. Moreover, pickers, who toil under the heat of Florida's hot sun, receive "the same basic rate of pay [they] received thirty years ago."[72] When inflation is accounted for, wages for tomato pickers have "actually dropped by half over [this] period." Because most workers are unable to afford their own vehicles, they have to live close to the worksite. This leads workers to pay rural slumlords "exorbitant rents to be crammed with ten or a dozen other farm workers in moldering trailers with neither heat nor air conditioning," conditions that are dehumanizing and "condemned in any other American jurisdiction."[73]

Harvesters are paid so little for their backbreaking work, that they are "lucky" to receive seventy dollars "on a good day." Even if workers arrive at the worksite on time, they must often wait hours for the fog to clear or the dew to dry. And, if it rains, workers are not able to pick, because they can only pick tomatoes when the vines are dry. When this situation occurs, they are not paid. During periods of time where a sudden freeze destroys the crop and puts tomato pickers out of work, the state's soup kitchens "exceed capacity." Workers, unable to afford rent, often set up temporary "encampments in the woods."[74] These deplorable conditions have been ignored for decades.

Hispanic immigrants, who have few other earning options in the United States other than demanding agricultural work, are exploited by farm owners to such an extreme that not only are their labor rights violated, but also their human rights. Douglas Molloy, chief assistant United States attorney in Fort Myers, has called the conditions under which harvesters are forced to labor a form of modern-day "slavery," in the most literal sense of the word. Over a period of

[72] Ibid xviii.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid xv.

fifteen years, the state's law enforcement has "freed more than one thousand men and women who have been held and forced to work against their will" in Florida's tomato fields, whereas the majority of instances of slavery have gone unreported.[75] Barry Estabrook, author of a book recounting the horror of Florida's tomato industry writes about the number of cases that harken back to the cruel days of American slavery.

> "Workers were 'sold' to crew bosses to pay off bogus debts, beaten if they didn't feel like working or were too sick or weak to work, held in chains, pistol whipped, locked at night into shacks in chain-link enclosures patrolled by armed guards. Escapees who got caught were beaten or worse. Corpses of murdered farmworkers were not an uncommon sight in the rivers and canals of South Florida. Even though police have successfully prosecuted seven major slavery cases in the state in the last fifteen years, those brought to justice were low-ranking contract field managers, themselves only one or two shaky rungs up the economic ladder from those they enslaved. The wealthy owners of the vast farms walked away scot-free…"[76]

The city of Immokalee, Florida lies only an hour away from Naples. Despite its proximity, however, downtown Immokalee, an area that is home to mostly Hispanic men, is a "warren of potholed lanes leading past boarded-up bars and abandoned bodegas, moldering trailers, and sagging decrepit shacks."[77] Not surprisingly, Immokalee's annual per capita income falls at around $9,700, and "half of the people in the city of fifteen thousand lives below the federal poverty line," and the likelihood of becoming "a victim of a violent crime" is greater

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[75] Ibid xix.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid Pg 74.

than in the "average American municipality."[78] This city, what seems like a forgotten ghost town, is actually the largest farmworker community in Florida and the "town that tomatoes built." Molloy, who has worked on several slavery cases from Immokalee, affirms that any American who has eaten a tomato from this town has "eaten a fruit picked by the hand of a slave."[79]

Wealthy land owners would often lure poor immigrants into what may be perceived as a good business transaction, offering food, housing, and pay for their work. In one of the cases that Molloy had actually looked into, however, workers were thrust into tiny shacks with three or four other men, forced to "urinate and defecate in one corner," offered "two meager meals a day," and coaxed into taking loans that saddled them with crippling debt. The threat of death constantly loomed above their heads. Harvesters that had become ill or too weak to work were "kicked in the head, beaten with fists, slashed with knives or broken bottles, and shoved into trucks to be hauled to the worksites," some "manacled in chains."[80] After a few years of having to face such abuse, one of the workers was finally able to escape and was fortunately discovered by a supporter of the Coalition of Immokalee workers.

The Coalition of Immokalee workers "is a worker-based human rights organization" that is dedicated to fighting against "human trafficking" and "gender-based violence at work." Formed in the early 1990s as a part of a growing farmworker community, the CIW has been responsible for uncovering, investigating, and assisting in the "prosecution of numerous multi-state farm slavery operations across the Southeastern U.S."[81] Despite the their inability to form a union, due to legislation passed during the New Deal Era which exempted farmworkers from

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[78] Ibid Pg 75.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid Pg 77.
[81] "About CIW." Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Coalition of Immokalee Workers, 2012. Web. 24 Feb. 2015.

organizing, harvesters were able to form a coalition and launch a nationally recognized campaign that aims to educate "consumers on the issue of farm labor exploitation" and, in particular, demands better wages.[82]

Tired of contractors violating their civil rights and denying them the opportunity to move toward economic freedom, a small group of workers began organizing in 1993 in local churches. Florida farmworkers earn sub-poverty wages, regardless of their citizenship status, and are denied overtime compensation, healthcare, or paid vacation. Among their many demands, the CIW asked for fairer wages and for the American public to, at the very least, give greater consideration to those people who are responsible for collecting the food that ends up in their kitchens. Workers are paid a predetermined amount of money for every container of fruit that is picked under a piece rate system of pay. Under the law, workers must be paid the $7.25 an hour minimum wage, which workers could possibly get to if they were to pick 10 or so bushels within an hour. Of course, certain conditions, such as rain or transportation issues can often prevent workers from being able to work for the day.[83] According to the U.S. Labor Department, migrant workers generally earn $10,000 and $12,000 annually, which means that workers actually earn between five and six dollars an hour.[84] Through continuous efforts, which included a thirty-day hunger strike and a 234-mile march, the coalition was able to win industry-wide wage raises of 13-25% by the early 2000s.[85]

One of the key aspects of the Civil Rights Movement that manifested itself through the Labor Rights Movement was the process of "economic transformation through mechanization of the southern agricultural sector" that brought "thousands of African Americans and Whites

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[82] Ibid.
[83] Estabrook Pg 99.
[84] Ibid Pg 100.
[85] "About CIW."

off the plantations and into" the cities.[86] If it were not for this key relationship between economic opportunity and human rights, blacks that had been "isolated and severely oppressed on southern plantations" would not have been able to "qualitatively transform their social and political struggle for freedom."[87] Similarly, the CIW recognized the importance of human rights and pursued legal action against harvesters who had subjected migrants to deplorable working conditions. What they focused on most, though, was the importance of wage equality and economic freedom. Many of the workers were bound to harvesters because of their debts and could not earn enough money to rise above half the national poverty line. The extreme poverty and legal vulnerability of migrant workers created the conditions for modern day slavery.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers faced an incredible challenge. With so many legal and practical barriers to effective organizing strategies among workers, including the seasonal nature of farm work that influences workers to move state to state, it was difficult to figure out how to discern whom exactly to engage. Just as in the 1960s the lower classes enlisted the support of middle class professionals, the CIW reached out to those who could ensure greater visibility to the cause of marginalized farmworkers, such as "students, people of faith, journalists, writers, and eventually a network of volunteers, interns, bloggers, and organizational and political allies."[88] As a result of campaign organizing and cooperation, the coalition was able to "draw attention to the abysmal wages of the Immokalee pickers."[89]

It seemed unlikely that the CIW would be able to organize workers because traditional labor law was unavailable to the organization. However, the CIW found a way to appeal to

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[86] Brookfield, Stephen, and John D. Holst. Radicalizing Learning: Adult Education for a Just World. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley, 2011. Google Books. Web. 24 Feb. 2015. Pg. 97.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Gottlieb, Robert, and Anupama Joshi. Food Justice. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2010. Google Books. Web. 24 Feb. 2015. Pg 130.
[89] Ibid.

major industries, root out specific slavery cases, and increase support for the cause. Growers had often ignored the labor contracting system, denying that they had any control over the wages that were being paid to workers, and turned a blind eye to oppressive working conditions for tomato pickers.[90] Through consistent organizing efforts, based on cooperation and the importance of economic opportunity, the coalition engaged in several "work stoppages, hunger strikes, and high-profile boycotts, such as the successful five-year boycott of Taco Bell" in 2004.[91]

Pictured are students from various D.C. schools, including Georgetown University, American University, and George Washington University protesting a Wendy's in support of the Campaign for Fair Food. This protest occurred in 2014.[92]

The coalition successfully launched in 2001 the Campaign for Fair Food in order to address human rights violations that were occurring in the Florida tomato industry. The

[90] Ibid.
[91] Goldring, Luin, and Sailaja Krishnamurti. Organizing the Transnational: Labour, Politics, and Social Change. Vancouver: UBC, 2007. Google Books. Web. 24 Feb. 2015. Pg 106.
[92] *Protest for Campaign for Fair Food at Wendy's in D.C.,* Washington, D.C. Personal photograph by author. 2014.

coalition linked the deplorable farm labor conditions in the fields with the multi-billion-dollar retail food brands that were purchasing their produce. The CIW gained national attention with a major march against Taco Bell in 2001, and the popular fast food chain conceded to pay a penny more per pound of tomatoes to the workers, to "adopt a genuine policy of zero tolerance for slavery, and to establish an 'enforcement code of conduct' drawn up with the participation of the workers.[93] After a few years of campaigning, other major companies followed suit, including fast food chains like McDonald's.

The case of the workers in Immokalee is one of many instances where immigrants in the agricultural industry have faced not only human rights abuses but also blatant economic exploitation. The organizing efforts of the CIW, particularly the march against the fast food industry, mirror the plight of sanitation workers during the Memphis strike. By emphasizing the juxtaposition between extreme poverty, the development of slave conditions, and deplorable working environments, the CIW managed to organize a group of workers and gain national attention despite numerous legal obstacles. In the end, the workers managed to garner wage increases and a stronger guarantee of human rights protections. The farmworkers further demonstrate the inherent tie between civil rights and labor rights the importance of collaboration for organizing groups.

Looking at the Similarities

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers participates as a part of a larger network of organizing groups. The National Farmworker Alliance was created to be an overarching collaborative that works toward improving the lives of millions of migrant and seasonal farm

[93] Bales, Kevin, and Ron Soodalter. The Slave next Door: Human Trafficking and Slavery in America Today. Berkeley: U of California, 2009. Google Books. Web. Pg. 62

workers. Just as activists during the black freedom movements appealed to people with greater organizing capacities, such as pastors and journalists, the NFA created an association with their greatest supporters: students. With greater increases in science information regarding food and farming techniques, newer generations of students have become more aware of the conditions in which their food is grown.

The Student Farmworker Alliance emerged in 2000 after the CIW coordinated a 230-mile march from Ft. Meyers to Orlando, Florida. The coalition appealed to students that were eager to learn about and participate in a movement to end the presence of "sweatshops in the fields."[94] Since its formation, the Student Farmworker Alliance has been instrumental in the solidarity movement for greater civil and labor rights among migrant workers. The organization helps the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, among other groups, achieve their goals and create public awareness surrounding abuse in the agricultural sector. In only 16 months the coordination of the SFA and the NFA led to major concessions from four of the nation's leading food service providers, including Bon Appétit, Compass Group, Aramark, and Sodexo.[95] On their website the SFA writes:

> "Our struggles are not identical, but they converge. Farmworkers and young people are objectified by the corporate food industry: farm workers are seen as tractors that cheaply harvest raw materials while young people are seen as mouths that obediently consume branded products. Following farmworker leadership, we as young people have the power to resist corporate exploitation and

[94] "Our History." Student/Farmworker Alliance. Student/Farmworker Alliance, n.d. Web. 04 June 2015. <http://www.sfalliance.org/our-history/>. This is the website of the SFA.
[95] Ibid.

organize for systemic change in our food system."[96]

The above passage demonstrates the type of alliance that has been instrumental to solidarity efforts since 1960s with mistreatment of black workers. The National Farm Worker's collaboration with students is similar to how black workers during the Civil Rights Movement appealed to middle class people, who could afford to take time off of work in order to participate in organizing efforts. Moreover, the passage shows an overall recognition of the link between economic equal opportunity and civil rights, as students empathize with concerns over corporate power. In fact, the first student alliance that was formed in collaboration with Mexican American activists was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the 1960s. Just as students that are working with the CIW today, the committee wanted to "challenge not only American racial mores and the political system, but also the economic and class structure of the nation."[97] Most importantly the organization wanted to demonstrate a recognition that "African American and Mexican American were victim to the same oppressive forces."[98] This understanding only further demonstrates the inherent link between civil rights and labor rights, one that continues to serve a major concern today. Moreover, the CIW's use of student organizers shows how campaigning efforts during the 1960s and modern day are remarkably similar.

Louisiana: Post Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina was one of the costliest and deadliest natural disasters in U.S. history. In particular, the hurricane was the most severe storm to hit the Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf Coast since 1969 when Hurricane Camille struck. The hurricane demolished over 300,000

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[96] "Who We Are." Student/Farmworker Alliance. Student/Farmworker Alliance, n.d. Web. 04 June 2015. <http://www.sfalliance.org/who-we-are/>. This is the website of the SFA.
[97] Behnken, Brian D. The Struggle in Black and Brown: African American and Mexican American Relations during the Civil Rights Era. Lincoln: U of Nebraska, 2011. Print. Pg. 79.
[98] Ibid.

homes, caused record levels of flood damage, severely marred New Orleans's levee system, displaced hundreds of thousands of residents, and led to the deaths of nearly two thousand people. The extreme damage that the coastlines of Louisiana and Mississippi incurred led to a large labor demand to clean up affected cities, repair the damage, and upgrade weather safeguard systems, such as the levees in New Orleans. During this period, an emergency federal decree temporarily halted immigration-enforcement sanctions, and a large number of Latino immigrants were hired for these construction efforts. Unfortunately, they were exposed to horrific labor and living conditions. While the working environment for immigrants in Immokalee, Florida was not overtly visible to the general population, the deplorable working conditions of Latino immigrants during post-Katrina reconstruction caught the attention of many citizens; it shed light on the labor conditions of immigrant workers in other areas of the country as well.

A survey conducted in 2006 found that "almost half of the construction workers" dedicated to the construction and clean up efforts in New Orleans were Latino, the majority of whom were unauthorized.[99] These workers, due to their vulnerable legal status, often faced civil rights and labor rights violations on the job. Such abuses included wage theft (especially for unauthorized immigrants), unsafe working conditions, and exposure to workplace hazards with no mechanism for holding employers accountable for employee injuries. Throughout reconstruction efforts, Latino immigrants would often have to endure "long days in harsh, unsafe conditions…[and] spen[d] their nights in substandard, overpriced, overcrowded, often makeshift housing."[100] Sociologists consider the employment of post-Katrina reconstruction as "bad jobs," unstandardized jobs that lack an employer who takes on legal responsibility for

[99] Haubert, Jeannie. Rethinking Disaster Recovery: A Hurricane Katrina Retrospective. N.p.: Lexington, 2015. Google Books. Web. 24 Feb. 2015. Pg. 97.
[100] Ibid.

"deducting Social Security taxes or paying unemployment insurance premiums."[101] Consequently, the employers did not oversee how workers did their jobs, nor did they guarantee their employees long lasting employment; in such situations, wages are typically extremely low. Statistics show that "foreign-born workers in the construction industry" are more likely to hold these kinds of jobs.[102]

To make matters worse, Latino construction workers were exposed to major safety concerns and victimization outside of the workplace as well. Immigrants were often robbed because they had to carry their wages on their person, as they could not deposit their salary in the bank. Immigrants, scared to reveal their status, would often not report crimes that had been committed against them; sometimes, the police would even victimize them. Moreover, complaints from employees about wage theft, being robbed by other employees, or not feeling safe on the job were often dismissed by employer threats of deportation.[103] Immediately after the hurricane, President Bush temporarily suspended the Davis-Bacon Act, meaning that federal contractors would be permitted to pay "lower than the average, or prevailing wage," an action which would inevitably lead to the exploitation of low-skilled and desperate workers.[104] This effectively sanctioned unfair working conditions for these workers.

The situation that had occurred in New Orleans was reminiscent of what workers in Immokalee had faced. Latino immigrants were promised to be given the shelter and support they needed, but instead they were treated like sharecroppers who were completely dependent on and beholden to their employers. During the crisis recruiters "promised adequate transportation, food, and housing," but workers were generally concentrated in "warehouses and

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[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid Pg 98.
[104] Brunsma, David L., David Overfelt, and J. Steven. Picou. The Sociology of Katrina: Perspectives on a Modern Catastrophe. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010. Google Books. Web. 24 Feb. 2015. Pg. 272.

trailers" and complained of inadequate access to "food, electricity, and public transportation."[105] Many workers would complain that their lives consisted solely of "working and sleeping" with little time or resources to go to other areas of the city and escape the "tense" working environment.[106]

It is no surprise, given the vulnerable state of migrant workers, that employers exerted an incredible degree of control over their employees. An increasing number of workers entering the cities led to the development of what became known as "tent cities." Many workers, however, considered the shared difficulties of limited housing options and living together a form of brotherhood. Oftentimes fifteen or more people would have to live in a one-bedroom unit that "lack[ed] appliances and basic services such as water and electricity."[107] During this time, however, workers did not dare to report their employers for human rights violations because the employers had the power to "return the migrants," as if they were disposable.[108] Indeed, objectification continues to this day to be a principle issue with the treatment of low-skilled migrant workers, which are often seen by employers as replaceable. In New Orleans, for instance, the federal marshals cleaned up the city and removed the tents for Mardi Gras right after Katrina, as if the once clearly visible exploitation of the migrant labor force had never existed.[109] Martha Caso, who wrote about the Mexican Americans' struggle for recognition in the United States, characterized the treatment of Mexican workers in post-Katrina New Orleans thus:

> "The term slavery has been dropped, but the tradition is alive; slave owners do not exist as much. Slavery has taken a new face; people

[105] Ibid Pg 278.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid Pg 282.
[108] Ibid
[109] Ibid Pg 283.

> have a similar status to slaves or worse. They work for inadequate wages, and the slave owners do not have to provide housing, medical service, or food […] For example, Mexicans and other immigrant laborers from Central America are cleaning up the horrible mess left by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana. These jobs are hazardous and dirty. People who perform these jobs work as slaves, and they are paid low wages and have no health protection."[110]

In the case of the Immokalee, workers were subjected to a form of slavery and economic exploitation. What Caso demonstrates in the above passage, however, is that unfair labor conditions present a system of exploitation that represents a modern day form of slavery in other parts of the United States as well. Mexican migrant workers allowed into the United States after Katrina were exploited, and this is demonstrated by the fact that the federal marshals felt the need to rid the city of the evidence of clear labor rights violations. Latino migrant workers were specifically targeted to work on the clean-up reconstruction sites. Advertisements publicized at the time offered $16 an hour wages with no requirement for documentation, a solicitation that clearly appealed to undocumented workers.[111]

The suspension of the Davis-Bacon Act, which would have required employers to show proof of documentation with their employees, represents an oversight on the government's part. Migrant laborers, who were free to come to New Orleans and work for what they would have hoped were good wages, were completely unprotected and exposed to abuse. Workers in New

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[110] Caso, Martha. Invisible and Voiceless: The Struggle of Mexican Americans for Recognition, Justice, and Equality. Bloomington: IUniverse, 2011. Google Books. Web. 24 Feb. 2015. Pg. 42-3.
[111] Olam, Haley E., and Erin S. Stamper. "The Suspension of the Davis Bacon Act and the Exploitation of Migrant Workers in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina." Hofstra Labor & Employment Law Journal 24.145 (2011): 145-80. Web. 24 Feb. 2015. Pg. 145.

Orleans did not have the means to organize for better pay or work conditions due to the temporary nature of their work; however, the Southern Poverty Law Center has "filed two collective-action lawsuits against two corporations on behalf of up to 2,000 mostly immigrant workers in New Orleans," who did not receive compensation for their work or were severely underpaid.[112]

Looking at the Similarities

The New Orleans case represents a modern-day example of labor and civil rights violations for minority workers. All throughout the South the influx of immigrants arriving in the aftermath of Katrina under the relaxed immigration laws has led to an ever-increasing job market specifically for low-skilled migrant workers. These workers are often forced to take on the most difficult jobs. While the scenario is not an instance of organized labor, it does demonstrate that advocates in both movements need to be making more of an effort to highlight the extreme exploitation that migrant workers are experiencing. Much like the sanitation workers in Memphis, migrant workers have been thrust into a cycle of menial labor jobs for which they are entirely dependent on their employers and have no legal recourse to demand better treatment.

As Caso points out in her research, institutional forms of subjugation continue to permeate society. From African American laborers being denied equal economic opportunity under the law to migrant workers being specifically targeted for construction and cleaning work, the United States has a history of finding one group or demographic of people to perform the tasks that keep the country afloat. New Orleans is another instance of this trend, one that made people start to pay attention to the way immigrants are treated in the nation.

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[112] Reed, Betsy, and Adolph L. Reed. Unnatural Disaster: The Nation on Hurricane Katrina. New York, NY: Nation, 2006. Google Books. Web. 24 Feb. 2015. Pg. 210.

While workers in New Orleans were never able to organize along the same scale of laborers in Immokalee, Florida, they demonstrated how civil rights and labor rights are one and the same. Migrant workers were objectified to the point where employers considered them to be completely expendable. They experienced clear labor rights violations, were denied the wages they rightfully earned, and were thrust into deplorable working environments. They were also exposed to human rights violations because they were dehumanized as a tool that is merely useful for the government's needs. As African Americans were only considered 'fit' to work in the least favorable jobs, migrants workers have become the new demographic of choice for the 'dirty work.'

Conclusion: Working Forward

The cases of workers in Immokalee and New Orleans are ones that have been and are continuously replicated throughout the nation. However, they have often been ignored. These cases demonstrate that the struggle for equal economic opportunity for all groups within the nation, as well as the recognition that labor rights are civil rights, is a battle that has not yet been won. Supporters in both the Civil Rights Movement and Labor Rights Movement need to rally together in order to extend their support to all laborers whose human rights are violated. In the Southern United States worker abuses are blatant, and it is unjustifiable that they are overlooked.

The efforts of activists during the 60s and in the instance of the Memphis Sanitation Worker Strike ought to be replicated on a larger level. Not only is it essential for the nation as a whole to step back and review labor laws, such as the pillars of the New Deal Era legislation that preclude certain types of laborers from unionizing. It is also important for activists to build up a movement to support Hispanic immigrant rights. Movement leaders should seek to learn from

activists from both movements in order to improve the situation of migrant laborers in the United States. While it is important to recognize the key differences between what African Americans experienced in subjugation throughout American history, it is also important to acknowledge the similarities to new subjects of exploitation.

Unfortunately, this country has had a history of often scapegoating migrant laborers while also being dependent on migrant labor for a sustained economy. Quick to call out the government on not posing stricter anti-immigration policies, Americans still love to have other people do the backbreaking work. Lack of greater attention demonstrates a history of subjugation for the "other" within the United States that has become normalized since the days of institutionalized slavery. Only by recognizing the clear link between economic equal opportunity and human rights can true progress be made. In order to achieve change, activists ought to reach out to Latino immigrants in the South, scholars need to raise public awareness by choosing to develop scholarship on this specific subject matter, and leaders on all fronts need to look toward coordination as a solidarity movement. At this point in history, millennials have been granted a plethora of information, and they have easy access to resources for research. The Student Farmworker Alliance serves as an example of how greater public awareness on an issue can mobilize the masses and lead to meaningful progress.

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