

**FLETCHER, from page 5**

enough to just win. It's like, how do we deepen this? When we see that, then we'll know if we have a new labor movement.

**E.G.:** Finally, I was hoping you could speak about racism's role in capitalism and your thoughts on whether we can have a capitalist society without it.

**B.F.J.:** No. I will speak about it, but my answer is no.

One thing that many forces in the black freedom movement did not appreciate was that you can't get rid of racism without getting rid of capitalism. And one of the things that many white progressives and leftists don't appreciate is that you can't get rid of capitalism unless you take on racism.

You won't end racism until we've ended capitalism, but in order to end capitalism, you have to engage in the fight around racism. Because what happened in the very foundation of this country was the interpenetration of race into the construction of capitalism. The settler colonialism, who was defined as legitimate and illegitimate – the construction of racial slavery out of indentured servitude as a mechanism as both social control – as well as obtaining incredible amount of unpaid labor, was necessary for the construction of capitalism.

It's what Marx talked about in terms of primitive accumulation, and what David Harvey talks about in terms of accumulation by dispossession. All of these things were critical, and so you can't remove the stains of racism without addressing capitalism.

The problem with the Bernie Sanders campaign, which I supported in general, was that race was not central to Bernie Sanders' narrative, neither was gender. This great book called "The Many-Headed Hydra" puts it all together, about the way that race and gender were there from the very beginning.

It wasn't like there was some sort of pure capitalism that was developed, and then all of a sudden someone said, "Let's bring in this racial thing." What the British did though, is that they introduced a certain form of racism that was based upon what they had succeeded doing in Ireland with the racialization of the indigenous Irish population. What most people in the United States don't understand, and what most Irish Americans don't understand, is that when the British said that the Irish are an inferior race, they meant it.

**Social justice unionism is a unionism that says we need a movement for the class, a movement that goes beyond fighting for individual bargaining units and not just defending those people who happen to be union members. It's a trade unionism that envisions a labor movement of the working class.**



U.S. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS  
Progressive presidential candidate Robert M. LaFollette Sr. (left) and Samuel Gompers in 1924.

When I went to Ireland in 1988, I'd hear this term, "anti-Irish racism." Now, as this African-American radical from the United States who always associated racism with color, it was like, "How the hell is

'Irish' racism?"

Walking around Northern Ireland, as my father would say, "No bout-a doubt it." You could see it. It penetrated everything in terms of the way Irish were treated, in Northern Ireland and in Britain. But not when it comes to the United States. So what happens in the United States? They become white people. They are no longer an inferior race as they were in Ireland.

Now, when you become white people, you have to prove it. There is a probationary period for all European immigrant groups during which time they are not considered

white. For the Irish, it went on for a while, in part because the English hated the Irish, and the Irish, when they first came here, always stirred up trouble. It was really remarkable. They'd give guns to the Indians, help the slaves and all this stuff – it was wonderful.

The problem is after the potato famine, they came en masse, and they made a decision to become white people, which meant helping to suppress the Indians, helping to suppress the African Americans. That was the price of admission. That wasn't part of the narrative of the Sanders campaign. We have to introduce that narrative; it's got to be part of everything we talk about. People have to understand that. Otherwise there's no emancipation, there's no victory, because race becomes the skeleton in the graveyard, the hand comes out from the grave and grabs you by your ankles and won't let you out of the graveyard. That's where we are.

**E.G.:** Can you explain what you mean

when you speak about "social justice unionism"?

**B.F.J.:** Let me do it in reverse. In the late 19th Century, Samuel Gompers, out of the cigar workers union, an immigrant, former socialist, rose to lead the newly-formed American Federation of Labor, and he rejected his socialist background and rejected a certain current in trade unionism and advanced what has come to be known as "bread and butter unionism" or "pure and simple trade unionism." The idea was that unions should fight for wages, hours and working conditions, they should not form or try to form a labor party, they should deal pragmatically with the existing party structures, and among other things, they should constantly reaffirm their patriotism to the United States. Particularly after 1898, what that meant was supporting U.S. foreign policy. That brand of unionism became hegemonic in the United States. It didn't mean that there weren't other currents – Industrial Workers of the World had a very different approach to trade unionism and the left wing within what came to be known as the Congress of Industrial Organizations had a different notion – but Gompers' view was really the dominant force.

With the Cold War of the 1940s, the left wing in the labor movement was, to a great extent, crippled; in some cases absolutely destroyed, and Gompersism rises.

Social justice unionism is a unionism that says we need a movement for the class, a movement that goes beyond fighting for individual bargaining units and not just defending those people who happen to be union members. It's a trade unionism that envisions a labor movement of the working class. Clearly, that includes fighting for wages, hours and working conditions, but it also includes fighting for the broader interests of the working class, whether that is the homeless, the unemployed, people that frequently find themselves in the informal (gig) economy. It's a different vision of unionism, and it says that all of that is part of a labor movement.

Gompers rejected that. For Gompers, the labor movement and the trade union movement were synonymous, and the trade union movement happened to be, during his time, largely white and dominated by males, so the social justice unionism is embracing diversity and a fight for power.

The final point is that we need a movement that is proactive and that puts an agenda for working people at the heart of its political and legislative efforts. That does not necessarily mean setting up a third party. That's a whole other discussion, but it means whether you are operating within the Democratic Party, nonpartisan situation, or a third party, that the issue of a working people's agenda needs to be central.

*emily@streetroots.org*  
*Twitter @greenwrites*

For more news, interviews and features, and to learn more about our vendors, visit  
**NEWS.STREETROOTS.ORG**