

From Melting Pots to Intersectional Organizing

by Tamara Lee



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“An injury to one is an injury to all.”

I am so dedicated to that old union slogan that while I was engaged in my doctoral fieldwork in Cuba, I once took an illegal taxi in the dead of night to a dilapidated kitchen in a public housing high-rise outside of Havana and had it tattooed on my neck—in Spanish—by a Cuban tattoo artist who went only by the name of “el Ché.” But that is a long and complicated story. Here I reimagine that motto to fit an increasingly diverse U.S. labor movement, as well as to challenge the traditional melting-pot approach to organizing in the context of an increasingly divided society.

I teach a graduate seminar at Rutgers titled “Identity and Discrimination in the Workplace and the U.S. Political Economy.” The syllabus for the class synthesizes literature from critical race theory, gender studies, and industrial relations in order to more fully understand the systems of economic stratification and inequality that injure workers in different magnitudes depending on our socially constructed identities. Intersectionality, a theoretical framework commonly

employed in other disciplines but underutilized in industrial relations, is a useful conceptual tool for understanding the range of economic injury within the working class and how the labor movement can best respond to it.

The term *intersectionality* has been buzzworthy since its recent adoption by organizers of last year’s Women’s March on Washington. However, the concept of intersectionality was first introduced in 1989 by a black woman, Kimberlé Crenshaw, a scholar of law and critical race theory. By examining federal anti-discrimination court cases, she illustrates

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how our employment laws fail to understand or acknowledge the compounded nature of discrimination faced by workers who have interlocking identities.

The most-cited example from her groundbreaking study demonstrates the structural marginalization of black women under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act when a group of black women filed a claim for sex and race discrimination against General Motors for its hiring practices prior to 1964. In finding that the black women failed to state a



Demonstrators marching down 6th Avenue during the Women's March on New York City on January 20, 2018.

cause of action, the court held that because General Motors had hired women (all white!), the plaintiffs had no claim for *sex* discrimination.

Further, because General Motors had hired black workers (all men!), the plaintiffs had no claim for *race* discrimination. Thus, according to Crenshaw:

“Black women are regarded either as too much like women or Blacks and the compounded nature of their experience is absorbed into the collective experiences of either group or as too different, in which case Black women’s Blackness or femaleness sometimes has placed their needs and perspectives at the margin of the feminist and Black liberationist agendas.”

In other words, intersectionality describes the phenomena of heightened and unremedied injury experienced in the workplace and via the nation’s regulations, structures, and institutions due to being both black and female.

Let’s take the gender pay gap as another example. It is often reported that women suffer a 20-cent pay penalty

in the workplace when compared to men due to gender discrimination. But when we look more closely, we find that only

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white women make 80 cents to the male dollar. When we layer racial identity on top of gender, we find that black and Latina women are only paid 64 cents and 54

cents, respectively. If we consider additional identities such as sexual orientation, migrant status, or disability, we can start to see the amplified oppression of workers who fall at the intersections of several marginalized identities simultaneously. If you’re a black queer woman, believing that an injury to one is an injury to all is like believing that making 80 cents on the dollar is the same as being shot by police during a routine traffic stop on the way to your job making 64 cents before being terminated for your sexual orientation.

Hence, when we as a movement fail to consider the impact of intersectionality, we risk replicating or improperly discounting institutionalized and structural hierarchies—pushing workers with intersectional identities further to the margins of our movement, organizations, and scholarship.

I have argued elsewhere that the U.S. labor movement has a melting-pot problem. By that I mean that it has been a mistake to build solidarity generally by melting workers down into a shared class identity (e.g., low-wage workers, platform workers, the professoriate) and to ignore or downplay the significant differences in our oppression. So how do we approach organizing a diverse workforce with focus on our differences while avoiding the destruction of the labor movement in some sort of an oppression Olympics? The short answer is that it’s hard. Really hard.

The exciting news is that it is already happening! In our first set of case studies published on intersectionality in successful supra-union campaigns, Maite Tapia of Michigan State and I demonstrated that in the cases of the Restaurant Opportunities Center and the Fight for \$15 campaign, strategic organizing approaches that centered the amplified oppression of the most vulnerable workers was a key element in worker and ally mobilization. Moreover, in our current paper, a natural experiment involving the Women’s March, we go further and define the process of “intersectional organizing,” as well as its critical elements for use as a model for union revitalization.

To conclude, moving from a melting pot approach to intersectional organizing has implications for not only union renewal but also union relevance in a Black Lives Matter and Me Too era marked by heightened identity politics and disproportionate violence against women, communities of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, LGBTQIA communities, and workers of Muslim faith. An injury to one is an injury to all only if the most marginalized don’t have to wait for justice to trickle down and our liberations are truly bound up in one another’s.

Reference

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. “Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics.” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: 150.