



Labor Extension Bulletin

Race, Social Justice and Presidential Politics

October 2008

Wall Street has the jitters. Working people are hurting. The country hates the war. So why are polls showing such a close election? On September 24, former Boston-area labor activist Bill Fletcher spoke to standing-room-only audience of union members, UMass Lowell students and others and gave a direct answer: race. He underlined how race is affecting white voters' willingness to believe rumors and what he called "urban legends" (like: Obama is a muslim, Obama is a terrorist, etc.). He also responded to questions by giving advice on how to talk about race and the election.

Bill started by talking about the feelings of white voters. "There is a growing feeling among white working class people that they have been betrayed," he said. "People believe that if you work hard and you're dedicated, your life and your children's lives will improve. That hasn't been happening for twenty years. So [people say] someone must have robbed us. Good white people are suffering and they are looking for someone or something to blame – whether it is the wealthy, the benefits going to minorities, or women who are stepping outside their roles. That's how white working people who haven't gained anything from eight years of Bush believe they have more in common with a man who can't remember how many houses he owns and whose record is virtually identical with Bush's."

When white working people are hurting, they're vulnerable to myths, wedge issues, and culture wars, Bill said. The Republican campaign is using those tactics "because it's a good way to keep people's minds off other things. How to respond is complicated. You need to have conversations about the issues, and you also need to deal with people's fears. People have every right to be afraid. Their lives are collapsing. Pensions are vanishing – people literally won't be able to retire. They take it out on things they feel they can affect like gay rights, not those they can't," like Wall Street.

One student asked: *Some people won't vote for Obama because of his actions. People have told me he won't say the pledge of allegiance.*



Bill gave us this advice: "Push back. Question people: where did you get that information? Because it's not true. It's one of those urban legends like the alligators in the New York sewers. Obama did refuse to wear a flag lapel pin because charlatans of all sorts were wearing them."

Bill also pointed to fear as a factor. "Black folks scare white folks," he said. "We survived several hundred years of slavery that would make anyone angry, and then Jim Crow segregation that was actually the model for South African apartheid, and we're not supposed to display our anger." White people are afraid of that anger because they don't talk about its historical basis and they don't know what to do about it.

A labor activist commented: *One thing that is great about this election is that the labor movement is dealing with race as it never has before. White people are challenging white people.*

"We're playing out history," Bill said. "This is not just about an individual. Discussions have to happen among whites about race. It needs to be put on the table, which means talking about the history of this country. We have to engage in a real re-examination of US history so blacks, latinos, and whites can figure out our common interests."

There's more. A longer version of this article is on our website at www.uml.edu/laborextension/. If you want to see our videotape of the September 24 forum, contact Sue D'Amore at 978-934-3256 or Susan_Damore@uml.edu.

UPCOMING EVENTS

"Humor for Humanity" Candidate for President...

JIMMY TINGLE

North Shore Labor Council Legislative Dinner

Wednesday, October 15, 2008

6:00 - 9:00 PM

Location: Jimmy's Allenhurst 101 Andover Street,
Route 114, Danvers, MA

Individual tickets: \$40 for Delegates

\$50 for Non Delegates \$25 for Students/Seniors

Please join us for our 2008 Campaign FUN(d) Raiser
with Presidential Candidate Jimmy Tingle!

An evening of laughter with comedian Jimmy Tingle.
and viewing of the Obama and McCain debate on a
BIG screen TV

For ticket information call the NSLC at (781)595-
2538

Join the North Shore Labor Council

Women's Committee 4th Annual

Women's Solidarity Breakfast

Saturday, November 22, 2008

10 am - 12 noon

Location: Lynn Housing Authority Community Center
10 Church Street, Lynn, MA

"Inspirational Women of All Ages"

Speakers will address fighting:

- Privatization & Union Busting
- Immigration Abuses
- Sexism in non-traditional jobs

Please RSVP by November 18th call the NSLC at
(781) 595-2538

Free Breakfast and Childcare

SAVE THE DATE

UMass Lowell Labor Extension Program

Fall Open Enrollment Series

Can They do That?

Past Practice Grievances and

Mid-term Bargaining

Tuesdays

November 18th and December 2nd

6:00 - 9:00 PM

Session I – Tuesday, November 18th

**What are Our Rights When the Contract Doesn't
Cover It: Past practice grievances and mid-term**

bargaining Led by Bob Schwartz, author of "How to

Win Past Practice Grievances" and "The Legal Rights of
Union Stewards"

Session II – Tuesday, December 2nd

Confronting Management Blame-the-Worker

Health and Safety Programs: A case study in mid-

term bargaining Led by Nancy Lessin, from the United

Steelworkers' Tony Mazzocchi Center for Health,

Safety and Environmental Education and former Health

and Safety Coordinator for the

Massachusetts AFL-CIO.

For more information, contact Sue D'Amore at (978)

934-3256, send an email to: Susan_Damore@uml.edu

or check our website at www.uml.edu/laborextension

Hot off the Press:

Working Alone: the Erosion of Solidarity in Today's Workplace by Charley Richardson, published in the latest Edition of New Labor Forum. You can download the article from our website <http://www.uml.edu/laborextension/> and get more information about how isolation at work is increasing and increasingly undermining solidarity. Send us your stories about isolation at work to Charles_Richardson@uml.edu

