

# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

[Click Here](#)

[Home](#)

**Labor Leader to Obama:  
"We Have Your Back; We Will Not Let You Back Up!"  
The African World  
By Bill Fletcher, Jr.  
BlackCommentator.com Executive Editor**

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The president of the Maryland and DC AFL-CIO, Fred Mason, had an idea. Following the electoral victory of Barack Obama he found himself perplexed by the enthusiastic, yet very unfocused, response of organized labor as to what should happen next. While there was optimism in the air, what was missing was real content. But what was especially missing was any sort of public display of both support AND concern by US workers for an incoming Administration at a point of significant economic and political crisis.

The traditional labor union response to incoming Administrations, particularly those viewed as favorable by and towards unions and workers, has tended to be side-bar meetings where an agenda is discussed. These behind-the-scenes gatherings might have worked when unions were in a stronger position, but the diminishing power of workers and unions has resulted in such meetings having limited impact.

Mason, a long-time progressive, African American union activist and leader, started suggesting a different course of action. Why not have unions hold or sponsor celebratory parades around the USA to make plain both their support for President-elect Obama, but also the important issues that the incoming Administration must address that have a direct impact on working people?

Mason received two responses to his suggestion, which is what makes this commentary a "good news/bad news" piece. On the one hand, there were few takers on the idea of nation-wide rallies. True to form, there were no explicit objections raised to the suggestion; instead, silence. The failure to respond is illustrative of the crisis facing organized labor and the challenge to overcome it. A movement that has over-relied on lobbying and small meetings has strayed light years from the notion that a movement is disruptive and challenging. A social justice movement cannot always play by the rules, but has to call upon its members and supporters to make their voices heard - publicly and defiantly. In fact, mobilizing our base(s) is often the only weapon we have in order to win in the court of public opinion.

The silence that Mason encountered represented something far more dangerous than what at first glance could appear to be timidity. Rather, the silence was the result of years of defeat that have been rationalized away. The decline of the union movement, largely the result of mega-economic factors (for example, globalization) combined with vicious political assaults (such as the mass firings of the air traffic controllers in 1981 by then President Ronald Reagan), is as well the result of internal problems that inhibit many leaders and members from understanding the global economic and political battlefield on which we operate. Thus, when Mason suggested a nation-wide mobilization, the leaders' collective silence in effect said the following: "If we can even mobilize our members - which many of us think that we cannot - we run the risk of antagonizing political and business leaders. If we antagonize them, we will not be invited into meetings and we will be condemned to the wilderness."

What Mason recognizes, along with some other key union leaders and activists, is that the union movement was condemned to the wilderness a very long time ago by political and business leaders in the USA. The problem that the union movement confronts is how to change the terms of the discussion and ensure that the voices of the voiceless are heard on a national stage and can actually shift reality.

Though Mason was unsuccessful with his first proposal - and here comes the good news - he won support for "Plan B": a union contingent in the 56th Presidential Inaugural Parade on January 20th under the banner "America's Workers United for Change." What makes this contingent of more than 250 workers of particular interest, in addition to its historical significance, is that it brings together union leaders and activists from the AFL-CIO unions, Change to Win, the National Education Association, and constituency groups affiliated with the AFL-CIO. In other words, despite a painful split the union movement suffered in 2005, Mason was able to bridge the divide and help representatives from both sides, plus the independent NEA, join together to convey critical messages to a nation-wide audience:

- Workers, through their unions welcome the election of President Obama.
- Workers, through their unions, are demanding immediate action by the incoming Administration to support an economy that works for all; equitable economic development through the creation of GOOD JOBS - GREEN JOBS; and creating GREAT PUBLIC SCHOOLS as a critical to enhancing the participation of American workers in the global economy.
- Workers, through their unions, will support the Administration in taking on the

task of reforming our healthcare system to provide healthcare for all.

- Workers, through their unions and community allies must demonstrate that they will prepare to support the administration in meeting the great challenges ahead, but that they are unwilling to retreat in the face of the onslaught of employer attacks being felt, be they the auto loan issue - which is a *de facto* attack on auto workers - or the threats in state governments across the country to layoff workers and cut back on public services.

In this sense, this contingent is not the equivalent of a float in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. While union members can look at this contingent with pride and see themselves after years of being treated as both disposable and invisible, this contingent is not mainly about making people feel good. This contingent, more than anything else, is a public statement. Just as the workers at Chicago's Republic Windows made a statement in their takeover of the plant when Bank of America initially cancelled loans and denied the workers the compensation they were due, this labor contingent is putting the incoming Administration on notice: ***workers in the USA have had enough, and are not prepared to fall any deeper into despair; further retreat is simply not an option.***

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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

Click Here

[Home](#)

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