

The Racialized Picket Line: White Workers and Racism in the Southern California Supermarket Strike

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Abstract

In a time when union membership is increasingly becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, it is important to understand how race impacts the strategies of contemporary labor struggles. This study explores the racial consciousness of white union members participating in the UFCW grocery workers' strike in Southern California. Using data gathered through in-depth interviews and participant observation, I document the gender-specific racialization of 'scabs' and customers as expressed by white union members through a series of in-depth interviews and participant observation. This study uncovers the myriad ways white supremacy and white racial solidarity are created and maintained in a multiracial labor struggle.

Keywords

labor, masculinity, racism, union organizing, whiteness, white privilege

Introduction

The history of organized labor in the USA is tarnished by the racist exclusion of people of color from trade union participation (Fletcher, 2002). This exclusion not only severely impacted the development and success of organized labor in the USA, but also contributed to the multi-faceted racial oppression people of color faced since people of color were often excluded from unionized jobs. This racist exclusion also made it possible to maintain white male hegemony within union ranks further increasing their social standing in society (Glenn, 2002). While a great deal of literature has examined the role of racism within unions in the early 20th and 19th Century (Brueggermann and Boswell, 1998; Tuttle, 1976), less has been written about the role race plays in today's labor movement (Royster, 2003; Warren, 2005). As a result, the racial dynamics in the modern labor movement have not been adequately explored.

Strikes are an ideal arena to study the ways in which racist practices and ideology pervade the labor movement for numerous reasons. Historically, strikes have engendered some of the most intense instances of racial antagonism (Bonacich, 1976). Picket lines have often evoked the most explicit instances of racial conflict within the labor movement, which at times even led to physical assaults on people of color by white workers and violent race riots (Tuttle, 1976). For example, in the Great Steel Strike of 1919, over 350,000 steel workers, who were primarily white men, went on strike (Spencer, 1994) which led to some of the most intense exhibitions of racism in the history of the labor movement (Tuttle, 1976). During the strike, African American workers were labeled a scab race by many of the white strikers and were vilified as anti-labor and incapable of labor solidarity (Kimmel, 1996). In addition to the racist ideology enacted on the picket line, white strikers also viewed the African American replacement workers as an economic threat (Brueggemann and Boswell, 1998). Given this historical context, strikes are important indicators of racial antagonism among organized labor.

The United Food and Commercial Workers' (UFCW) supermarket strike in Southern California provides a great opportunity to examine whether or not these dynamics are still present in today's labor movement. In October 2003, the UFCW called for a strike against Vons and Safeway resulting in the longest and largest grocery strike in US history. The lockout of workers at both Ralphs and Albertsons immediately followed the initial strike declaration. The 70,000 plus grocery workers in Southern California went on strike primarily to protect their wages, health benefits, and pension funds from being drastically cut by the grocery stores. The supermarkets claimed they needed to cut the wages of their workers in order to compete with Wal-Mart who was planning on moving into California's grocery market. Wal-Mart paid their employees significantly less than the grocery stores did, and offered fewer benefits to their workers (Gibson, 2004). Over 900 grocery stores were affected by the strike leading to losses of over \$1 billion in sales.

This research seeks to answer a number of questions in order to uncover how racism operates in the contemporary labor movement by focusing on the Southern California supermarket strike:

- 1) How is working class whiteness expressed in contemporary strikes?
- 2) What distinguishes contemporary racial conflicts within the labor movement from their historical antecedents?
- 3) How do gender and race intersect in influencing white working class consciousness and white racial solidarity?
- 4) To what extent are customers racialized by white strikers in strikes that have a public component such as retail stores?

It is important to contextualize the racial politics of California during this study. There has been a rise in nativism, anti-immigrant backlash, and white supremacy in the state over the past several years. In light of the demographic shift occurring in California, and concomitant rise in reactionary right-wing politics, the racial attitudes of white workers in this study must be grounded within this context.

Methods

The impetus for this research occurred by chance. I was listening to Southern California's 'progressive' independent radio station, KPFK. The station was running a story on the grocery strike, which featured an interview with a UFCW organizer. During the interview, the UFCW organizer mentioned that the union was having 'problems with Asians' not supporting the strikers by refusing to respect the picket lines. The fact that this union leader expressed such unabashed racism made me wonder if such sentiments were also common among rank-and-file strikers on the picket lines. I immediately went home and started to research the strike. Two-days later I began this research project to find out if these racist sentiments expressed by the UFCW leadership also existed on the picket line.

For this study, I conducted 25 in-depth interviews with participants at 16 different store locations in or around Eastern Los Angeles County. The stores were located in the cities of Diamond Bar, Pomona, Hacienda Heights, Chino Hills, Rowland Heights, and Glendora. I chose these locations not only because I grew up in Diamond Bar, and spent a lot of time in these surrounding cities, but also because the UFCW leader expressed anti-Asian racism and most of the stores in these areas have significant Asian American populations. The interviews ranged in duration from 30 minutes to two hours, with most falling somewhere in between.

All of the interviews occurred at the strike location and all of the names used in this article are pseudonyms. I identified myself to the strikers as a graduate student conducting research on the strike and member of the United Auto Workers (UAW).¹ The vast majority of the interviews were conducted through a one-on-one basis. There was one group interview that spontaneously occurred when the striker called over fellow strikers to join in the interview. The interviews were not conducted in a formal series of questions and answers. Instead, I chose a semi-structured format to allow for spontaneous conversational turns which would best facilitate the unmasking of the subtleties of racial discourse. I chose to ask general questions while simultaneously probing individuals in an informal conversational pattern. I did not ask the strikers about their attitudes toward specific racial groups until they first brought a group up on their own. The one exception I had regarding not asking about specific racial groups was when I would introduce the topic of white people, since whites were persistently not marked by the majority of the workers I interviewed. It was not necessary to introduce specific groups of color since white workers readily introduced this, often very quickly. Throughout the interviews, I did not promote nor condemn the racist sentiments expressed by the workers. Instead, I would ask for elaborations, explanations, and clarification of their views. This was a necessary approach to garner an unadulterated description of white workers' racist attitudes.

Since the major purpose of this study was to gauge the racial attitudes of white workers, the interviews for this article were conducted with white strikers. I purposively chose only to gauge the racial attitudes of white workers for a number of reasons; a decision which brings both positive and negative outcomes. First, the negative: by concentrating

only on the racial attitudes of white workers, workers of color's perceptions and experiences are not thoroughly examined. This shortcoming also leaves out important issues such as the relationships among and between various groups of workers of color. While these issues are immensely important, I decided to leave these topics to other researchers. My approach for this study was to place white people at the center of analysis. As a white man, I consciously decided to utilize my insider racial status to examine the racial attitudes of white workers. This approach allows for a glimpse into white supremacy that might otherwise go unexamined.

It is important to note my privileged racial-gender location as it was very influential in gathering data for this research project. I believe my positionality as a white man influenced the way white workers interpreted my questions. Since I am a white man who was asking general questions about race and the strike, this gave some of the white strikers the misconception that I must be sympathetic to racist views. Whites are typically socialized to not think of themselves as racial subjects. Thus, when whites express an interest in talking about race to other whites, it is often inferred by other whites as a way to talk about the 'problems' with people of color. I also believe my privileged status as a white man allowed some workers to feel more comfortable in expressing views they might normally hide toward people of color.² Among the interviews with white strikers, 14 were conducted with men and 11 with women. Strikers ranged in age from 19 to 54 years of age. I identified the most recurring themes which emerged from the interview data. In addition to interviews, I also observed the striker's attitudes, tactics, and rhetoric on the picket lines.

The Racialization of Strikes

The racialized picket line can be thought of as a metaphorical dividing line of conflict influencing the way a strike unfolds. Part of this process occurs when labor (class) solidarity becomes weakened and/or replaced with racial forms of solidarity (Martinot, 2003). Racialized strikes arise within the context of capitalism, where exploitation is structured on the racial and gender divisions among workers which encourages differential treatment and a wage tier system (Jackman, 1994). Social inequality structurally determines varying degrees of exploitation particular groups of workers face based on a group's race, gender, and/or citizenship status (Bonacich et al., forthcoming). These divisions allow capitalists to seek out labor forces that are most susceptible to higher degrees of exploitive labor practices while simultaneously lowering the wages of more privileged workers (Bonacich, 1972, 1975, 1976).

Glenn (2002) develops a similar argument, tracing the ways in which capitalists utilize divisions of workers along lines of race and gender inequality. Owners of capital sought to maximize their profits by paying the lowest possible wages while enacting maximum control over the production processes. Moreover, they took advantage of existing inequalities by using marginalized groups (people of color, immigrants, women, lesser skilled) that could be hired more cheaply. Free labor, as a Western

institution, was not developed for people of color but instead for white people and white societies (Blauner, 2001). Citizenship rights, or the lack thereof, prove to be a pivotal signifier of defining class relations in the USA along racialized and gendered lines. Citizenship as it applies to labor thus plays a major role in linking racist economic doctrines that distinguish between forms of free labor and unfree labor (Almaguer, 1994; Glenn, 2002). Since citizenship rights were historically given to free (white male) labor groups, white men were allowed a privileged position in the US labor market. These privileges have allowed white men to join unions and increase their economic and social power in society (Royster, 2003). This also led to the formation of the 'worker citizen' ideal, which is constitutive of the dual attributes of whiteness and masculinity forming the ideal-type American worker (Glenn, 2002). Therefore, exclusion was a primary feature of the making of the white working class (Fletcher, 2002; Kimmel, 1996).

For white strikers participating in a multiracial labor struggle such as the grocery strike, this racial divide creates a host of practices that white strikers enact in order to maintain the racialized picket line. Although white workers ultimately stand to lose from a racially divided working class, many white workers continue to reinforce racial divisions. One of the reasons for this is that the ideological component of white supremacy becomes a site of influence beyond the sheer class location of the white working class (Martinot, 2003; Wellman, 1993).

Roediger's (1991) analysis of the formation of the white working class offers a starting point for explaining how racial divisions operate in today's labor conflicts. From the perspective of white workers during a strike, scabs are racialized and 'othered' as impediments to class victory. In this sense, white workers view workers of color as a threat and thus express their resentment toward workers of color as an act to protect white workers' interests (Bonacich, 1972). The split labor market theory has been used to explain the underlying causes behind racialized labor and the divide among working classes along racial lines (Bonacich, 1972, 1975, 1976; Boswell, 1986; Brown and Boswell, 1995; Brueggemann and Boswell, 1998). According to Bonacich (1972: 549), 'The central hypothesis [of the split labor theory] is that ethnic antagonism first germinates in a labor market split along ethnic lines.' In a split labor market, the dominant racial/ethnic (i.e. white) group develops a racial caste system that confines lower-cost labor of color to lower-paying and lower-status jobs, thereby undermining multiracial class solidarity. This impacts the degree of solidarity across racial lines and often reinforces divisions among workers. In other words, split labor markets can aid in maintaining/producing racism and racial privilege along with other forms of inequality, such as patriarchy and sexism.

In the UFCW grocery strike, the union was not formally split along racial lines. However, white workers still enacted racial divisions despite standing side-by-side with workers of color. By divided I am not referring to physical barriers, but more so along the lines of where (racial) solidarity is transmitted. People of color are marked as such by white workers, while white workers themselves remain racially un-marked, or raceless. This serves both to strengthen the power of the capitalist class while simultaneously

weakening the power of the working class. In other words, this process produces tension among workers and deflects tension away from capital.

In strikes that have a public component, especially in the retail sector where there are workers and customers interacting on the picket line, a whole set of other actors (i.e. customers) become important in understanding the racialized picket line. Customers who enter the stores can act as a crucial determinant regarding the outcome of retail strikes/boycotts. While white strikers generally disapprove of any person who breaks the picket line regardless of race, customers of color who cross the picket line face a racialized form of antagonism during the strike that white picket line crossers do not encounter. This leads to a number of instances by which white workers racialize particular racial groups of color as either 'pro' or 'anti' labor. In the majority of cases, people of color are associated as being anti-labor by white strikers (although in distinct ways for each group), while their white counterparts who choose to continue to shop at the stores are only associated as anti-labor on an individual basis. Since white workers do not view their racist practices as an implicit move of racial solidarity with (white) capital, the capitalist class continues to benefit from the racial divisions of workers. There has been a tendency in the labor movement to only define solidarity solely in color-blind class specific terms.

Despite the fact that customers of color may have economic influence over the white strikers during the strike (since boycotts are key leveraging points during retail strikes), white workers hold racial (white) privilege, and use this as leverage over the customers of color. Therefore, in strikes that have a public component which mixes workers and customers of retail stores, a fourth dimension should be added into the racialized class conflict between capital, white labor, and racialized labor: namely, the racialization of customers. The racialization of customers creates yet another level of conflict during a strike that further deflects focus between the original class of workers (both white and workers of color), and the management class. This added dimension of the racialized picket line carries with it important aspects that influence the degree of labor solidarity unions have with the public. It also underscores the entrenched nature of racism in the USA, and points to the ways white workers envision themselves as a white-identified native-born class.

In the past, a black/white paradigm has been utilized in understanding the racial antagonism in US labor strikes. Most of the research has focused on the struggles between African American and white workers and has neglected the impact Latino/Chicano, Native Americans, and Asian Americans have had on race relations during strikes both in the past and present. The black-white paradigm is not sufficient for a number of reasons. The most obvious reason for this is that, in many regions of the US, the racial conflict found in contemporary and past strikes often involves the interaction of multiple racial groups, each occupying different economic/racial/citizenship positions and statuses during the strike.³ Subsequently, a distinct set of racial divisions is carried out in the process resulting in racial hostility on the picket line that is much more complex than solely focusing on the division of two races of workers.

Findings

Despite the fact that white workers stood side-by-side with workers of color during the strike and appeared to participate in a multiracial alliance against management, a great deal of racist rhetoric was still present in many white workers' descriptions of the strike as these data will demonstrate. These findings stand in opposition to the rhetoric echoed from many mainstream labor groups across the country. In many cases, the strike was upheld as a successful multiracial alliance without any significant instances of white racism. For example, immediately following the strike, a series of articles were produced for *Labornet*, an online forum that is concerned with increasing labor rights across the world and provides space for articles and analyses regarding current labor related events. The news of the California grocery strike was a popular issue in the forum and was often heralded as a victory for multiracial alliances of workers in which inequality, in all of its manifestations, was trumped in the interests of class unity. According to one contributor:

I can also tell you without exaggeration that the picket line has a way of breaking down racism, sexism, and homophobia more than many of us realize. The grocery workers were a very diverse workforce. It was 60 percent women and a large number of people of color and immigrants and there were also many white workers. It's hard to explain what it was like on the line but I promise you I've never seen anything else like it in my life. People were a team out there ... I don't know what will happen in the future but for five months their world wasn't about color or sex. In many ways their world was broken down to striker, scab, and company. It was just a material fact that they had to learn how to get along with each other. We saw friendships form that you wouldn't have thought were possible and in many ways identity politics were washed away. (Labornet, 2005)

According to this commentator, the grocery strike reflects a new era in labor politics, one that is not marred by racism and sexism; instead the strike acted as a dissolver of difference. Since the strikers constituted a diverse group of workers in terms of race and gender, many labor advocates characterized the strike as a paramount example of the modern color-blind labor movement. According to this interpretation, the mere racial diversity of the strikers was reason enough to assume that racial antagonism was not a key development during the strike. Obviously this has numerous implications for our understanding of the way race plays out in today's labor movement and marks a departure from past analyses of racism in labor. This color-blind notion of unionism was far from the reality that shaped the picket lines that I observed. White strikers engaged in a great deal of subtle and explicit forms of racism targeted towards two major groups: racialized replacement workers, or scabs, and customers of color who crossed the picket line.

The racialization of temporary workers was not the only aspect of the racialized picket line. As I conducted the interviews, it became apparent that many of the customers were being racialized by a large number of the white strikers. There were numerous customers who crossed the picket line and continued to shop at the stores during the strike. Many

of these customers became racialized by white workers in a number of different ways. This led certain white workers to view particular communities of color as impediments to the success of the strike.

Many white strikers reproduced an atmosphere that created tension between the strikers and the racialized workers/customers. For example, some white strikers would criticize people of color who were crossing the picket line, or refer to the scabs using racialized rhetoric in order to scare off potential customers from shopping at the stores.

A number of themes emerged in the interviews that prove significant in furthering our understanding of the racialized picket line. Most notably, the interview and observational data suggest that white workers rely on a series of racialized assessments of the strike which fall into the following areas:

- 1) the gendered racialization of Latino and African American temporary workers as criminals;
- 2) the use of stereotypical images of Asian Americans as model minorities and apolitical; and
- 3) the conflation of whiteness with being an authentic member of the working class.

Criminality and Scabs

It is scary who they will hire to keep us out of work.

As noted previously, the racialized picket line is maintained through both the racialization of temporary replacement workers, or scabs, and customers. Scabs were without a doubt racialized as black and Latino despite the fact that in many cases, there were significant numbers of white scabs either equaling or surpassing the number of black and Latino scabs. In times of labor conflict, people of color often become hyper-visible for white workers. In turn, this leads to scapegoating and racial antagonism. The racialization of scabs and customers rely on distinct processes which rely on larger racial stereotypes that are present in society (Omi and Winant, 1994). The racialization of scabs as criminals was perhaps the most commonly relied upon racial imagery that white strikers invoked to describe the replacement workers.

The common theme of criminality was invoked at several strike locations in many white workers' descriptions of temporary replacement workers, or scabs. Cindy, a 32-year-old white woman, describes the scabs as

very ignorant people. I heard they [store managers] are hiring ex-cons left and right. These people [scabs] look like gangster thugs. I am telling all our customers that they [managers] are not doing background checks on any of them [scabs]. (Cindy, 15 November 2003)

In this instance, Cindy constructs the scabs as criminals to invoke notions of fear into the minds of consumers. Her use of 'gangster thugs' carries with it notions that are often replicated in the media and other cultural outlets that stereotype black and brown men as gang members.

Kirk, a 50-year-old white man, indicates he

heard that there was this psycho black homeless scab at one of the stores. He pulled a knife on some of the picketers. I will tell you this, back in the good old days, these types of scabs would have gotten their asses kicked, no joke. We can't do that kinda thing no more with all the surveillance cameras and shit. (Kirk, 4 December 2003)

Kirk is very open about his willingness to commit violence onto some of the temporary workers he perceives as a threat, in this case, a so-called 'black homeless scab'. Kirk also points to the 'good old days' to describe a time when racial violence was more acceptable and prevalent on the picket line.

Max, a 24 year-old white man, notes,

many of them [scabs] are the ghetto type. You know, your dirtier elements of society, the criminals. [What do you mean?] They are ripping off the stores like crazy. Let me just say these are not the type of people you or I would like to face in a dark alley. (Max, 15 November 2003)

In Max's description of the scabs, he too invokes a common reliance on the rhetorical use of 'ghetto' to implicate larger racist images of African American people without directly referring to African American people explicitly. In this instance, Max can get his point across (that the scabs are African American) without the risk of sounding racist. This formulation is similar to what Bonilla-Silva reports in a (2003) study of white racial attitudes/ideology. This is a qualitatively different strategy for dividing workers along racial lines than was practiced during strikes in the past.

Moreover, Max also attempts to foster solidarity with me as a white man as he assumes I would not want to run into a scab in a 'dark alley'. Thus, my insider status as a white man carries with it a whole set of assumptions that allows Max to bank on the fact that I will most likely know who he is referring to (in this case, African American men). Max's rhetorical strategy (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) draws on white people's (actual or potential) racist beliefs in order to undermine the legitimacy of the temporary workers while simultaneously legitimating the honor of white workers.

In a group interview with Glenn, a 37-year-old white man, and Sam, a 44-year-old white man, they each indicate that they heard that many of the scabs are criminals. In fact, this seemed to be a persistent rumor among white workers through several of the picket lines. For example, Sam maintains:

At the Ralph's across the street, they have people who just got out of prison working there now. They all came from Folsom Prison or the one around here. At least that's what I was told by the Ralph's picketers. I am just trying to get the word out since they have no background checks or drug tests for these animals they call workers. You just gotta' show up and you get hired. They just got out of prison ... it is scary who they will hire to keep us out of work. (Sam and Glenn, 14 November 2003)

Pete, a 27-year-old white man, adds:

I have heard there are some [scabs] with police records, you know what I mean. It is, like, the scabs are the types to jack from customers too. That's why if you shop here it's your own fault. Some of the scabs I know are gang members. We have a group of four or five Samoans that are definitely shady like that. (Pete, 21 November 2003)

Pete acknowledges that at times he had told white customers that they should be careful of the replacement workers, that some of them are known gang members. As indicated above, the racialization of scabs as criminals mainly referred to African American and Chicano replacement workers, however racist stereotypes referencing other groups of color, such as Samoans was also present. These statements point to the situational context of racial oppression. That is, the ideology of white supremacy is adaptive and often is localized depending upon which groups of color are present in an area.

At another store Kristine, a 39-year-old white woman, discussed what she heard about another store:

I know of another store where we were told that it looks like they [managers] went to the nearest prison and got the nastiest looking people and bussed them in. Their new head checker scab at this store [in Diamond Bar] is a '*cholo*-type' and has 'trigger finger' tattooed on his hand. The scabs look like they are gang members. Many of the little old ladies in Pasadena are afraid to go into the stores. It's a scary bunch they have in there. (Kristine, 15 November 2003)

In this instance, Kristine invokes racist images of Chicanos to buttress her argument that the scabs are bad or illegitimate workers. She chooses to describe this particular worker as a '*cholo*-type' which allows her to contrast racist images of Chicanos with regular types, who are presumably white workers. At the same time, she contrasts the image of 'criminal scabs' with that of 'little old [white] ladies'. Her reliance on the sanctity of white femininity as contrasted with exaggerated hyper-masculine notions of Chicano men allows her to align herself as a white worker with the moral force of goodness (whiteness).

Other white strikers used racially coded language to describe the appearance of scabs. Anne, a 54-year-old white woman, describes the visual differences between the regular workers and the scabs.

They get to wear Levis on the job. They all wear their pants all baggy and can barely keep them from falling off. They probably have one hand working and one hand in the cash register. They don't look like classy workers. They look like homeboys off the street. They have no concept of proper attire and class. (Anne, 5 December 2003)

Anne equates baggy pants with homeboys which are in direct opposition to how 'classy' (white) workers dress. Similarly to other interviews, the use of homeboys allows Anne to describe the replacement workers without explicitly referring to their race.

Other strikers mentioned how they utilize a strategy of informing the approaching customers that they should be skeptical of their food since many of the scabs indulge in illegal drug use. Jennifer, a 40-year old checker, describes her view of the scabs:

I am sure the scabs don't have bills like us. They are just looking for a fix to pay for their habit. I have seen it too many times, and I tell people who shop here all about this. I tell them [customers] that they better use caution eating the deli food because crack-heads are cutting their meat. (Jennifer, 26 November 2003)

Jennifer constructs the scabs as addicts in order to scare customers into not supporting the stores. While her descriptions of scabs as illegal drug users may not necessarily invoke racial imagery, her use of 'crack-heads' marks the racial aspect of the issue. She draws on larger socially constructed stereotypes of 'crack-heads' which carries with it a racialized imagery to paint a picture of media constructed stereotypes of drug addicts (who are usually portrayed as poor African American people from the inner-city).

These constructions also have a gendered component. The construction of scabs as criminals relies on the social construction of pathological masculinities of men of color. This is significant since the construction of scabs becomes reliant on racialized (subordinated) masculinities (Connell, 2000). Racialized subordinated masculinities stand in contrast to hegemonic white working class masculinity. It also points to the fact that many white workers (across gender) view the scabs in (racialized) masculine terms. Morgan (2005) notes how class and labor strikes have been historically situated in masculine terms. The use of racialized masculinities to describe the scabs further supports this connection and links class and masculinities with larger structural hierarchies in society (Pyke, 1996).

Racialized Customers

They ain't worried about you.

While the racialized descriptions of replacement workers often were discussed using racial code-words such as ghetto, *cholo*, and homeboys, the racialization of consumers took on a form which was much more likely to explicitly mark the racial group, particularly with

descriptions of Asian Americans. In communities that had a significant Asian American customer base, for example Diamond Bar and Chino Hills, white strikers often explicitly referenced Asian Americans. Chinese and Korean Americans constitute the vast majority of Asian Americans in the cities studied followed by smaller but significant populations of Indian and Filipino Americans. In many of these descriptions, Asian Americans were marked as anti-labor and as politically apathetic.⁴ Based on my observations, it was common for white strikers to ignore Asian American customers who were approaching the store while simultaneously approaching white customers to explain their reasons for the strike.

Joe, a 30-year-old white man, explicitly notes that Asian Americans are likely not to respect the picket lines. According to Joe,

Most people who cross the picket line are Asian. They don't care. [Why do you point out Asian folks?] They don't care about us. They get all these government loans for free. What do they care? They look at us and think, 'Get a new job'. Half of 'em drive past our picket lines in their brand new BMWs. Why should they care about us? They got it made here in the US. (Joe, 17 November 2003)

Joe's description of Asian Americans relies on a series of stereotypical images that he uses to explain the so-called reasons why Asian Americans remain indifferent to the strike. Drew, a 43-year-old white man, also described Asian American customers through a racialized class lens.

They [Asian Americans] got everything they want here. I mean, they don't give a fuck about us or the strike. They all own their businesses and drive around in their fancy cars, they don't have our values. (Drew, 18 November 2003)

A common theme echoed by many white strikers constructed Asian Americans as a homogeneous group of economically successful, politically conservative people, and anti-labor. Since Asian immigrants, especially East Asian immigrants, are often constructed as model minorities by many white people in the USA, white workers utilize these images to mark Asian Americans as being unsympathetic to the interests of the working class. The end result constructs Asian Americans as part of the capitalist class. Moreover, the construction of Asian Americans as homogeneous in terms of class or immigration experiences undermines the distinct and multi-faceted barriers Asian Americans face in the USA.

Marcus also marked Asian Americans as a group that threatened the success of the strike:

Most Asians don't even know what a union is, let alone care. [Has your local attempted to do outreach to the Asian community members who shop at this store?] There is no point. They [Asian Americans] don't want to hear anything about the strike. I don't think I have ever turned a single Asian around [from entering the store. Marcus then turns to his fellow strikers and asks:] Have you guys ever turned an Asian around? I sure as hell

haven't. They just don't care. They come to our country and get all of these loans to start their own businesses. They ain't worried about you. [Sarah and Nick approach us and begin talking about Asian American customers. Sarah adds,] Most of them don't speak very good English so they probably don't understand. [Joe replies,] They understand more than you think, I'm telling you. Some of them just pretend they don't speak English so they don't have to support unions. (Marcus, Sarah, and Nick, 23 November 2003)

Marcus perceives Asian American customers as not caring about the strike and claims he has 'not turned a single Asian around' from entering the store. This contributes to his justification of not approaching Asian Americans.

Luke, a 31-year-old white man, and union representative, also elaborated on the ways Asian Americans undermine the strike effort. I asked: 'How are the strikers dealing with people who cross the picket line?' Luke responded,

Well you know it is really tough. Here, in Rowland Heights, we have a ton of Asians. They don't seem to care about the strike. Many of them can't speak English. They just come walking through the picket line. Out here, at least in our area, it is the Asians who we have the biggest problem with. (Luke, 15 November 2003)

The anti-Asian sentiment at the Rowland Heights picket line was very common among white workers. Michelle, a 19-year-old white woman, mentions 'The store in Hacienda Heights had more of a problem with Asians than we have because there are even more Asians in that area.' (Michelle, 15 November 2003) In both of the above instances, Asian Americans are perceived as a homogeneous racial group that is not concerned with the union's efforts. The 'yellow peril' narrative commonly reinforced the notion that Asian immigrants are overpopulating the USA, which is contributing to the lack of public support for the strike.

Note the differences between the racialization of scabs and consumers. The latter relied on explicit references directed against Asian Americans while the former invoked racial code words to describe African Americans and Latinos. One possible reason why Asian Americans are referenced in explicit terms may have to do with the lower representation of Asian American strikers. That is, since there were more Latino and black strikers on the picket line, white strikers may have been more comfortable invoking explicit racist statements about Asian Americans. However, in stores which had lower representations of Asian American customers, such as the stores in West Covina and Pomona, anti-black and Latino rhetoric was more common.

Billy, a 45-year-old white man who works at an Albertsons in Pomona, elaborates on his view of why the strike continues to go on. According to Billy,

You know? We should not have to even be out here. I mean, like, you know, I know that Hispanics and the blacks have high unemployment rates and don't have diplomas and all that stuff. And the whole welfare thing and all, I mean, it's like, I feel bad for them. But,

you know, I mean, they are the ones still shopping here like nobody's business. We joke around that it looks like a swap meet in our store now. I mean, it is all messy and stuff and they are all rude. Like I said, they are vultures looking for the cheapest deal in town. Because of their ignorance, they take advantage of us as workers and help the cause of the management. It's umm, a sad thing to say, but it is true. (Billy, 9 December 2003)

Billy references his racialized rhetoric in a semi-sympathetic tone. This semantic move allows the expression of racist rhetoric while striving to maintain the appearance of a color-blind outlook (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Billy describes African American and Latino/Chicano shoppers as poor welfare recipients who are ignorant of the real issues of the strike. This implicitly locates white shoppers as more receptive and/or informed about the strike and its implications.

Whiteness and Working Class Authenticity

American workers are becoming a thing of the past, it is very unfortunate...

The racialized construction of scabs and consumers can only manifest itself in contrast to the non-racialization of white workers. By racializing the scabs and customers, white workers simultaneously de-racialize their own statuses as (white) workers. Similarly, in order for capitalists to rely on racialized labor, there must be a class of racially privileged (white) laborers that can be undercut. This de-racializing component views white people as individuals, while people of color become lumped under a homogeneous racial(ized) group. This process also leaves white consumers who chose to cross the picket line, along with white scabs, racially un-marked. This has numerous implications for labor alliance building during a strike.

Lisa, a 39-year-old white woman, constructs herself in opposition to racialized temporary workers. According to Lisa,

When I came back to California I noticed that they let in a lot of immigrants, in a short period of time. I feel that this is part of the issue that explains why the majority of scabs are minorities. It's because they have nothing else. They are just going to go for what they can get. As Americans they don't care for us. I was raised with a family that had family values, that's why I would never scab. (Lisa, 16 November 2003)

In this excerpt, Lisa constructs the white worker as a dying breed of sorts. She builds her identity as a white worker that is especially reliant on citizenship.

Anne emphasized the differences between her identity as a white worker and racialized groups who cross the picket line or scab. According to Anne, 'I don't think a lot of minorities understand the issues because all they are out for is to take and not to give. American workers are becoming a thing of the past, it is very unfortunate ... If all of

them would have stood with us at the picket line, it would have probably been over by now.' (Anne, 5 December 2003) In this instance, American workers are implicitly constructed as white and native-born as it is described in opposition to the foreignness of immigrants of color. This also underscores whiteness as a prerequisite for being a part of the authentic working class. Lisa describes the people who refused to cross the picket line as 'People with pride, integrity, respect, and knowledge. People that know what it is to be a patriot.' (6 November 2003). Once again, her articulation of those who refused to cross the picket line is constructed in opposition to the degenerative 'minority' values she described earlier, and is therefore assumed to reference white people.

In addition to the non-marking of white strikers, scabs, and consumers, there was another group that was not racially marked by the strikers: the capitalist class. In an effort to train the temporary replacement workers, corporate officials flew management trainees to California to assist in the training of the scabs from out of state. While the majority of these trainers were white, no striker referred to them as white. Instead they were simply referred to as 'scab management'.⁵ This indicates a shift in the racial articulation of white workers. While white workers consistently racialize the class situation of their racial and economic subordinates, they fail to make the connections of race when it comes to the employer class (which is mainly white). If the scab managers who were flown in were overwhelmingly people of color, I would expect that these managers would have likely been racialized.

When I asked strikers about the racial makeup of the scab managers, they responded with telling insight underscoring the non-racialization of white workers' superiors. Tammy responds,

If I think about it, most of the scab managers are white. It's weird to think of it that way, they are also the ones in higher management positions. I never thought of it this way, when I think about it, it is weird. (Tammy, 14 November 2003)

Similarly, Max describes the out-of-state scab managers in the following way:

The managers were flown in from Florida and Texas. All the ones I have seen have been white guys I guess. That's a pretty odd thing that I never realized. (Max, 15 November 2003)

The white striker's reluctance to discuss scab managers as a racialized white group illustrates another instance of the ways in which the racialized picket line is maintained. It also demonstrates the gendered hierarchy of the picket line as masculinity remains unmarked in the management class. Ultimately the invisibility of whiteness reveals how the racial consciousness of white workers necessarily precludes the marking of white people as belonging to a racial group, even when this group is in a position of power over the workers. This disconnect in white consciousness allows the mostly white management teams from out of state to only be described in color-blind class terms.

Although the capitalist class is disproportionately white and male, this fact elusively remains unacknowledged by white workers in much of their rhetoric further reinforcing the racialized and gendered division of the strikers and the power of the employer class.⁶ This has numerous implications that serve to weaken the working class. The failure of white workers to racialize the capitalist class implicitly draws a racial and masculine form of alliance grounded in white solidarity between white workers and white capitalists, even though these groups are engaged in ongoing class conflict. This form of white solidarity is not necessarily purposive or conscious on behalf of white workers. However, the implications ultimately serve to benefit the (white male) capitalist class regardless of the intent of white workers. Despite the fact white workers oppose the oppressive dynamics their employers impose upon them, and view them as class adversaries; a key leveraging point in confronting the power of the capitalist class is avoided by the failure of white workers to racialize their class oppressors. Racially marking the capitalist class as white and male exposes the capitalist division of workers along axes of oppression and introduces renewed possibilities for resistance against exploitation.

Discussion

The data gathered for this project are informative on numerous levels. The data show how white working class consciousness manifests in today's so-called color-blind union era, in light of the changing dimensions of race relations in society (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Omi and Winant, 1994). It also demonstrates how our conceptual understanding of the ways racism operates during periods of labor unrest needs to be updated in order to address changing racial dynamics of modern workforces. The research findings show that white workers envision themselves as representing the true nature of the working class and articulate this standing in opposition to racialized people of color.

Each group of color represents a different obstacle to the views of white workers, which is contingent upon differing stereotypes of varying groups of color. We can simplify this situation as follows: African Americans and Latinos/Chicanos are seen as too poor to be able to live up to the moral and economic standards that are in line with white working class ideology. For Latinos/Chicanos, their perceived lack of citizenship and failure to assimilate into American culture marks them as antithetical to the goals of white labor. That is, Latinos are further cast aside as not understanding or representing American values due to the perception of negative stereotypes of Latino/Chicano immigrants. African American workers are viewed as immoral and incapable of fully recognizing the problems with scabbing. Both of these groups (African American and Latino/Chicano workers) are viewed as being historically weakened by the state, making them undesirable actors in working class struggles. Since they have been historically marginalized (albeit in very differing and unique ways) they are both viewed in light of larger stereotypical images of African American and Chicano masculinities that are perceived by white workers as violent and/or immoral. These stereotypes point to the

linkages between racism and classism; that is, racial stereotypes are largely connected to class stereotypes and vice-versa.

In contrast to Latino and African American workers, Asian American customers are viewed as too rich, too foreign, and aided by the state to be in solidarity with the interests of the white working class. The model minority stereotype is used to mark Asian American customers in opposition to white workers. Asian Americans are compared in line with the employer class despite the low number of Asian Americans in the management of the grocery stores where the strikes occurred. This shows the extent to which white workers will rely on the differing racial constructions of people of color to reinforce the position of the white working class.

Instead of inciting explicit hatred or violence directed against people of color participating in multiracial union organizing, today's white workers tend to use racial code words and other more subtle forms of racialized rhetoric to undermine scabs (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Omi and Winant, 1994; Wellman, 1993). The use of less explicit racial rhetoric used by white strikers to describe scabs of color allows them to disguise their racial intentions, while still getting their underlying point across. This newer form of racialized rhetoric acts to maintain white hegemony within union ranks and also acts to maintain white racial solidarity while still appearing to be egalitarian to outsiders. The use of racial code words by white strikers is also demonstrative of what Omi and Winant (1994) identify as the rearticulation of racial ideology. Understanding these changing dynamics in white working class racial consciousness is important in order to assess the modern labor movement's shortcomings so that we can build strategies to combat such impediments to the success of organized labor.

As these data demonstrate, the racialized class statuses of workers of color are points by which white workers enhance their moral position in the strike. Since white workers can no longer explicitly exclude workers of color from unions to the same extent as practiced in previous times, white workers have developed newer strategies to marginalize people of color, which rely on larger structural forms of inequality that white workers capitalize on in their descriptions of scabs and customers.

While these findings are not conclusive, and cannot be generalized across the labor movement as a whole, they still illustrate important implications for the future of organized labor. The changing ways in which racism operates in contemporary labor struggles suggests that unions should update and rebuild their strike strategies and work to confront issues of white supremacy within union ranks. White supremacy has not been defeated in the modern US labor movement. Simplistic notions from the past, such as a color/gender-blind class consciousness, need to be interrogated and rearticulated so that class consciousness becomes linked to other forms of struggle and equality. In other words, a more comprehensive vision of class must evolve that incorporates the multiple dimensions of inequality as they intersect with capitalist exploitation, racism, sexism, and homophobia.⁷ Instead of focusing solely on diversity (which is important, particularly in leadership positions), unions should actively integrate an anti-racist/sexist agenda that would work to confront white male supremacy within union ranks and dispel notions of color/gender-blind union organizing.

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Notes

- 1 The UAW represents University of California graduate student teaching assistants.
- 2 Insider status crosses multiple layers of identity. Although I emphasize my whiteness here, other factors such as gender, class, sexuality, and age also impact the way I am perceived as an insider.
- 3 See Glenn (2002) for an overview of how labor relations and struggles structured race-gender-citizenship relations among multiple racial groups in the USA.
- 4 See Horton (1995) for a good overview of the challenges/issues facing Asian Americans and newly arrived Asian immigrants in Los Angeles.
- 5 In my conversations with workers of color, it became readily apparent that workers of color are far more likely to point out the whiteness of the scab managers.
- 6 Since white male strikers shared both whiteness and maleness with the majority of the scab managers this differentially privileged them in contrast to white female strikers.
- 7 This is not a new idea, but one that has been promoted by women of color feminists for many years. See Combahee River Collective (1979) for an excellent introduction to this perspective.

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