

**Report of the
Civil Rights and Equity Committee
to the
75th Convention**



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Report of the
National Civil Rights and Equity Committee
to the
75th International CWA Convention

The Troubling State of Our Nation

Michael Brown, an unarmed black teen, was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson. This tragic killing raised outrage and action in Ferguson's black community, which is over 60 percent of the population. But, this community is policed by a force that is nearly 95 percent white.

Politics failed and fueled the fire. Black residents were left out of the political process, with only 1 in 10 black voters participating in elections.

And, this lack of participation was reflected in Ferguson's institutions. The city council had 6 seats, but only one of those was held by an African-American. The mayor was white. The city manager was white.

Why be surprised? With a 22 percent black poverty rate along with troubled residents and politicians with no vision, you end up with disillusionment and unrest.

While it took many days for leaders to show concern and respond to the situation, we wondered why they weren't talking about the core issues at play. Is it because police brutality and racism are not issues our political leaders want to address, particularly in election years? Are politicians afraid of taking on racially charged debates? Are they afraid of driving people of color to the polls in record numbers? Perhaps it is because they're not willing stand up to political donors who prioritize police militarization over justice and equality.

Clearly, the vast majority of police officers are good, conscientious, and responsible professionals who respect the rights of every citizen in the communities they serve. However, it is impossible to ignore the fact that staggeringly high numbers of innocent and unarmed minority citizens are brutalized and even killed during encounters with police, without anyone being held accountable. Nor can we ignore an unequal justice system that targets people of color with unjust arrests, fines, and imprisonment in support of the intentional proliferation of the prison industry.

Racism in law enforcement is a complicated and controversial issue. It is an issue that keeps us divided and fighting amongst ourselves at the very time when we need to come together, work together, and understand together the root cause of this and other problems in our society. This, too, is a byproduct of money in politics. This, too, is a byproduct of voter suppression. This, too, is a byproduct of a broken immigration system. And, this, too, is a byproduct of unfair trade policies that destroy the working class.

Brother and sisters. If we focus only on black versus white, on police versus civilian, and remain on the surface, we will continue to argue and fight amongst ourselves. Nothing will be accomplished; things will only get worse. We must dig deeper and understand how we got here. Only then will we see a pathway to a better America.

Gerrymandering and Our Democracy

Normally, we would expect more seats in Congress to go to the political party that receives more votes. In 2012, Democrats received 1.4 million more votes for House of Representatives candidates, yet Republicans won control of the House by a 234 to 201 margin. Why? Because of gerrymandering.

Or, as Republican strategist Karl Rove has said, “He who controls redistricting can control Congress.”

Gerrymandering has become the preferred way for Republicans to defy the principle of majority rule – or democracy – in an era in which minorities will soon be the majority. In other words, it’s a way to reduce the political influence of people of color, as well as that of the white demographic groups that tend to vote Democratic.

The principal opportunity for gerrymandering comes every ten years when the national census is taken, and city council, state legislature, and congressional district boundaries are redrawn to reflect the growing and shifting population.

Though redistricting is supposed to protect the fundamental principle of one-person-one-vote, it is possible, through artful drawing of district boundaries, to put large groups of voters on the losing side of every election.

The Republican State Leadership Committee, a Washington-based political group dedicated to electing state officeholders, issued a progress report on Redmap, its multiyear plan to influence redistricting. The \$30 million strategy consists of two steps for tilting the playing field: take over state legislatures before the decennial Census and then redraw state and Congressional districts to lock in partisan advantages. The plan was highly successful.

Gerrymandering is not hard. The core technique is to jam voters likely to favor your opponents into a few throwaway districts, where the other side will win lopsided victories—a strategy known as packing. Another strategy involves “cracking,” which splits likely opposition voters into several different districts, ensuring that they only represent a minority in any one district.

Across much of the country redistricting artists work with political partisans, corporations and other special interests to creatively shape districts to thwart the will of the people. It is an anti-democratic game that both Democrats and Republicans have played, but the unabashed ruthlessness of the GOP in recent years has been chilling.

Gerrymandering has also become more scientific. In the old days, it relied on the judgment of politicians to gauge the leanings of each community. In modern times, computer analyses have allowed politicians to become much more precise in how the districts can be best arranged for electoral advantage.

Over the past few years, as the Republican Party has gained control over more state legislatures, the GOP “has turned redistricting into a finely-honed, well-financed project that has virtually insured their control over the House,” said Bill Berkowitz, who reports on right-wing strategies.

That means that – in many states — the once-a-decade redistricting process has let lawmakers choose voters, not voters choose lawmakers. On the national level, to a troubling degree, American voters no longer collectively select the make-up of the House of Representatives. Rather, the state legislators who design the districts do.

Then, by combining sophisticated gerrymandering with “voter ID” laws and other voter suppression efforts, the Republicans ensure that their voting “base” is represented disproportionately in the halls of government – a fundamental violation of the core principle of democracy that each vote should count equally.

In this way, Americans are given the optical illusion of a democratic process: elections are held, votes are counted, and victors are declared. But, the contest is essentially rigged at the start by meticulously crafting the congressional or other district.

Some legislators have flirted with the idea of gerrymandering the presidency itself under the guise of Electoral College reform, including a short-lived plan to allocate electoral votes by Congressional district. In contrast to the current winner-take-all system, which usually elects the popular vote winner, the proposed plan would have elected Mitt Romney, despite the fact that he had five million fewer votes than President Obama. This is basically an admission of defeat by Republicans in swing states, who recognize that their policies do not have the support of the majority of the population.

In 2012, 10 states, Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Virginia, Ohio, Florida, Illinois and Texas, ended up with Congressional delegations that were proportionally unmatched to how their citizens voted. For example, in North Carolina, where 51 percent of voters voted Democratic, the congressional delegation ended up with nine of the thirteen seats going to Republicans.

Arizona was redistricted by an independent commission, Texas was a combination of Republican and federal court efforts, and Illinois was controlled by Democrats. Republicans designed the other seven maps. Both sides may do it, but one side does it more often.

Surprisingly absent from the list is California, where 62 percent of the two-party vote went to Democrats and the average mock delegation of 38 Democrats and 15 Republicans exactly matched the newly elected delegation. Notably, California voters

took redistricting out of legislators' hands by creating the California Citizens Redistricting Commission.

Politicians, especially Republicans facing demographic and ideological changes in the electorate, use redistricting to cling to power. It's up to us to take control of the process, slay the gerrymander, and put the people back in charge of what is, after all, our House.

To preserve majority rule and minority representation, redistricting must be brought into fairer balance. CWA will work with and build coalition to establish nonpartisan redistricting commissions in all 50 states.

The Enduring Need for Immigration Reform

Nearly two years ago the U.S. Senate passed a comprehensive immigration reform bill, but the bipartisan bill was killed by a few Republicans in the House of Representatives. However, there still remain critical issues with immigration between our southern border and Mexico. While arrests are down by more than 50 percent from the time period of 2004 to 2009, there has been an increase in the number of deaths by almost 28 percent. In 2009, U.S. Customs and Border Protection found 417 dead bodies along the border we share with Mexico. The most treacherous area for border crossing in 2009 was Arizona's Sonora Desert, where migrants were one and a half times more likely to die trying to cross than they had been in 2004.

One of the contributing factors to the death toll is that an estimated 95 percent of undocumented immigrants use smugglers to aid them in crossing the U.S. border. Immigrants using smugglers are not provisioned with food, water to stay hydrated, or shelter from the heat while trying to cross our southern border. Moreover, if they become dehydrated from the heat or exhausted from the trek across and cannot keep up with the group being smuggled, they are left behind. Smugglers also pack immigrants into trucks, trunks of cars, and hide them under seats in vehicles, which increases their chances of death by suffocation.

Another hazard they face is kidnapping. In 2011, Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) released a report that estimated nearly 400 kidnappings per year might be occurring. Mexican gangs will kidnap migrants and hold them for ransoms that range from \$1500-\$5000, which their families must come up with to secure their release. These same individuals are beaten and threatened with death if their families don't comply with their captor's demands. An additional threat faced by women and children is the risk of being sold into the human sex trade. Their captors use threats of violence and death and false promises of marriage to get them to acquiesce to their demands.

Furthermore, immigrants face corrupt police and immigration officials who are complicit in exacerbating the hazards they face. These corrupt officers and officials wait at immigration checkpoints on the Mexico side of the border and extort thousands of dollars from immigrants as they attempt to try and get across the border. On the U.S.

side, officials will threaten migrants with deportation and prison time if bribes are not paid. Unaware of their rights, migrants will pay the bribe to avoid problems and never report corrupt officials for fear of retaliation.

Women who use smugglers, referred to as “Coyotes,” to try and get across are often sexually assaulted by the Coyote or corrupt police officers and officials. The practice is so common that many smugglers will not take female immigrants on the trek to get across the border unless they have been given a contraceptive shot to prevent them from becoming pregnant. Many of the Coyotes consider this simply a cost of doing business.

Many immigrants do not have the financial resources to hire Coyotes to aid them in getting across the border, so they use the trains. There are countless immigrants killed every year trying to get across by rail. Many people who use the trains get on top of rail cars and fall asleep, and when the train goes under an overpass or under a tree branch they are knocked off and killed. It is the same for people who hang on underneath the train cars, they are often dismembered or killed.

The perils of immigration are not unique to individuals crossing the border we share with Mexico; people from Caribbean nations face dangers as well. People from Haiti have to traverse nearly 700 miles by water to make it to the United States, often in non-seaworthy boats. Those from Haiti, where GDP per capita is only \$1200, cannot afford to enlist the help of a smuggler. They’ve had resort to using rafts made of Styrofoam.

Similarly, it’s treacherous for Cuban immigrants trying to make the journey. They have to travel the 90 miles using make-shift boats and place their feet on U.S. soil to claim asylum. The only exception for them is if they can show a credible fear of persecution if they were to be sent back to Cuba after trying to escape. In that instance they can be sent to Guantanamo Bay and apply for asylum or refugee status for a different country. Because of all the hazards people in the Caribbean face trying to reach the United States by sea, immigrants have begun using a strategy of island hopping, where they start off in Haiti, go to Turks and Caicos Islands, Bermuda, or the Bahamas, then come to the mainland United States.

In summation, the issues that immigrants face at our borders have not dissipated. Immigrants simply looking for a better life for their families risk their lives to come here. We must renew the immigration reform bill that came so close to passing two years ago. We must make sure that we have an immigration system that is fair to all and provides everyone with a chance to provide for their families.

The Importance of Unions for LGBTQ Individuals

***“Creating and managing a diverse workforce is a process, not a destination.”
–R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr.***

Being an LGBTQ worker can be a difficult experience in and of itself, but adding the dynamic of navigating the workplace and union structure with that status increases the possibilities for brothers and sisters to feel marginalized. In many states, LGBTQ workers face discrimination, harassment, or other consequences in the workplace, with no recourse under the law. In these instances, their unions are the only place they can turn to if they run into bias on the job. This is why our unions must make every effort to ensure that there is strong contract language, that our leadership accurately reflects our membership, and that our daily functions embrace the diversity that is our union.

Unions have grown by leaps and bounds when it comes to inclusivity among members and leadership. We have seen the leadership within locals become more diverse and inclusive. However, even with these accomplishments, the needs of LGBTQ members continue to be excluded. The removal of these barriers must happen from both the top down and the bottom up within the union to effectively address the needs of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters.

The leadership of the union should be an accurate reflection of the membership. All members should be encouraged to actively participate in the daily activities of the union, which naturally leads to cultivation of potential leaders and executive board members. It is essential to make sure that the range of diversity casts as wide a net as possible. To ensure a wide net is cast, union leaders must make one on one contact with LGBTQ members and allies to find out the needs of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters and to encourage them to become active within the union.

In 29 states, it is legal to fire someone because of their sexual orientation. In 32 states the same is true for gender identity or expression. Although LGBTQ people are gaining many equal rights through legislation, that legislation has not transferred into the work environment. Many LGBTQ members continue to be fired or harassed based on their sexual orientation. The most effective line of defense for LGBTQ union members is a contract. Many contracts and by-laws include language for U.S. Constitution protected classes; however, these must be expanded to include clear and specific language concerning sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, which would offer protections to all LGBTQ members. LGBTQ individuals want the same rights and opportunities as all working people; to earn a living and take care of the ones they love. Eliminating the stigma and segregation created by limited contract language allows all members equal opportunities to satisfy these rational and realistic expectations.

Finally, what we do every day sets the tone for acceptance and inclusion. Talking about the need for measures to be inclusive and protect the rights of LGBTQ members is important. However, if those statements are not supported by our daily actions then it is all for naught. Practice using gender neutral words and assuming there is an LGBTQ

person or ally in the room. Provide training on LGBTQ issues. Encourage affiliation and participation with LGBTQ constituency groups like Pride at Work (<http://www.prideatwork.org/>) and other agencies that provide services, including education, in your local community.

Unions were created to give working people a voice in the workplace. Since the inception of organized labor, unions have raised the standard of living for all working people, unionized or not. Unions have years of practice providing inclusivity for members, including women and minorities. It is the responsibility of union leaders and activists to educate union members about LGBTQ challenges both within the workplace and community. Union leaders and activist must use their voice and power to ensure that inclusion within the union is the norm. Inclusivity within the workplace fosters a safe and productive working environment for all members.

Why Are Our Kids Committing Suicide and Acts of Violence?

Everyone reading this has a child, a niece, nephew, grandchild, godchild or friend under the age of 24. It is our responsibility to care for the well-being of others, especially with regard to the youth in our communities. Merriam-Webster defines suicide as, “the act or instance of taking one’s own life voluntarily and intentionally especially by a person of years of discretion and of sound mind.” Whether a young person has enough experience and years on this earth to make such a decision is certainly debatable. There are many, however, who are still making the decision to end their lives.

Today’s youth are crying out for help in a very drastic manner and it is our job as adults to implement strategies that tell them that we’re listening. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), we lose approximately 40,600 youth between the ages of 10-24 every year to suicide. What does it say about us as human beings that our children are killing themselves at the tender age of 10? What do these children know about life? What does that say about us? I’ll tell you what it says, it says, “We are not listening.”

Social media and technology cannot raise our children. Our youth are dealing with so many new variables that we weren’t exposed to during our upbringing, such as social and cyber bullying. I remember dealing with mean children during school hours. I also remember facing rejection. But, at home I was free from the torment. The youth of today are constantly connected to the bullies and, therefore, feel as if their struggle is unavoidable. This is where it becomes our jobs as parents, family, friends, neighbors, and a community, to step up and listen!

According to The Jason Foundation website, “More teenagers and young adults die from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease, COMBINED.” This is scary considering the fact that the children are our future. Why is this happening? According to “The Decline of Play” by Peter Gray, “play is nature’s means of ensuring that young mammals including human beings, acquire the skills that they need to develop successfully into adulthood.” When you take this into consideration and think about how much the children of today

actually play, the levels are extremely low! The children of this generation's playtime includes technology. They spend their time playing on video games, laptops, iPads, iPods, cell phones, tablets, and social media. But, they don't play hide and seek with neighbors, or tag, hopscotch, tug of war, jacks, or hula-hoop. Society is ever-changing and, honestly, this change may be destroying our youth!

Our children are surrounded by this new age play, technology. When you look at how much of our world is online, it's sickening and scary. We now have online middle and high schools which destroy face to face interactions, thereby creating robots that are desensitized and unable to communicate emotions, which is why the youth is so detached from us.

Are our children really human beings? Do they have the capacity to process emotions, like love, and decipher human connection? Or, are they robots? Are they iPhones, iPads or other forms of technology, which are disposable? Or, are they worth more of our time and effort to answer their cries for help?

Far too many of our children are ending their lives. Incident after incident has made my heart heavy. When Billy Watts ended his life, it was the final straw for me. I knew that I had to do something immediately. He was a 15 year old who attended Renaissance High School in Detroit, Michigan. This young man loved photography and music and he had a bright future ahead of him. But, the world became too much for him and he decided to take his life. He chronicled his suicide on Instagram starting five weeks prior! This young man cried out for help for five weeks on social media and not one person listened! There were thousands of people who saw his pleas for help, but no one bothered to help him. On October 26, 2014, he made his final post: it was a picture of his watch that showed the time of 12:03:20 with the caption, "Time to see if my watch is really waterproof." He then jumped to his death in the Detroit River!

If our world could let this go on for five weeks, what does that say about us as individuals, as a community, and as humans? Students at my youngest son's school were shown Billy's posts and asked what they would have thought had it been one of their friends. They all agreed that they would have thought that he was playing. I asked my daughter, who didn't know Billy, if she read his posts. She replied that she did read a few of them, but she too thought he was joking.

Back in the day, a teenager named Billy would have reached out to a cousin or a friend and talked about his thoughts and feelings; not to cyber space. Perhaps it would not have saved his life, but others would have been made aware of Billy's emotions and issues, and may have reached out and tried to help him. That cousin or friend would have seen in his eyes or in the tone of his voice that something wasn't quite right with Billy, that he was not the same old Billy and needed help.

We have created an environment where our children are more comfortable pleading for help on social networks than to an actual person. This same environment allows children to think that someone threatening to kill themselves is a joke. Well, there is

nothing funny about it and it has to stop! It has to stop now, and we have to stop it! I don't claim to have all the answers. But, together, we MUST find a solution. We MUST save our sons and daughters. Pay attention to their social networks, and take away the technology, iPhones, Androids for at least a few hours a day. Have them spend more time playing with each other, friends, family, and neighbors. Let's talk to our children and learn to listen again. Let them know that it's okay to fail, to come last, and to cry; it's called being human.

Respectfully submitted,

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