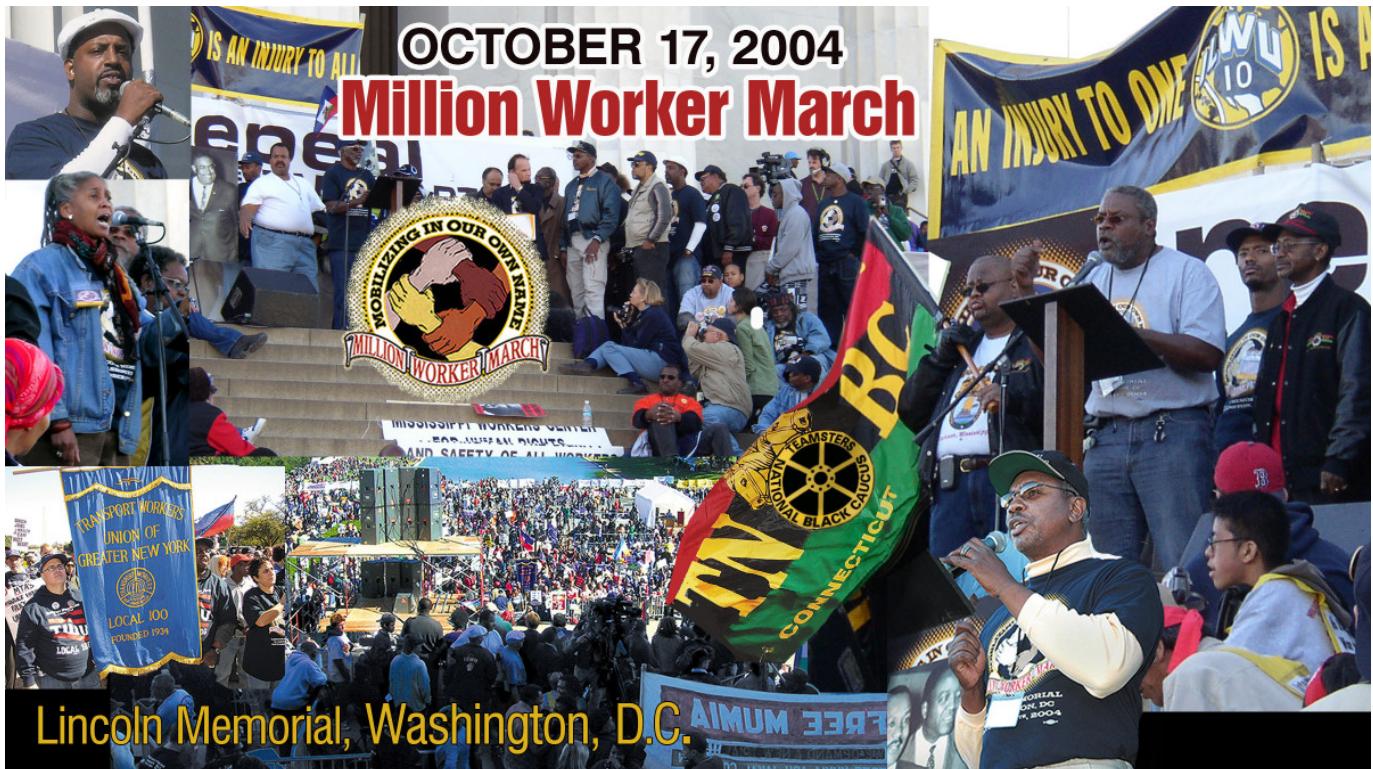


From Black Reconstruction to Elon Musk: A Black Labor History Perspective

written by Clarence Thomas
February 27, 2025



The following text is based on a talk given by Clarence Thomas, a third-generation retired member of ILWU Local 10, on a podcast for the Teamster National Black Caucus (TNBC) co-hosted by Richard Hooker, Secretary-Treasurer, Teamsters Local 623 and Chris Silvera, Secretary-Treasurer, Teamsters Local 808. In addition to Thomas, guest speakers included David Gonzalez, National Vice President of District 2 AFGE.

Solidarity Greetings, sisters, brothers, friends and enemies. In fact, you know we would just be fooling ourselves to think there are no enemies present on this podcast. First of all, I would like to thank Brother Richard Hooker for having me on the show and all of those involved in making this podcast possible. I am honored to be with you all today!

The subject of my presentation today — “A Black Labor History Perspective” — could not be occurring at a better time, not just because of Black History Month but also because of the current presidency of Donald J. Trump, a reckless, avaricious billionaire known for making racist comments, failing to pay his workers and outsourcing his manufacturing firms, in case anyone has forgotten. He is currently presiding over an unprecedented effort to exercise authoritarian rule over all branches of the U.S. government, with Elon Musk wielding unmitigated authority as head of DOGE.

There has been a long history in this country of trade union and white working-class intransigence against Black working-class advancement — alongside episodes of interracial class unity and the elusive promise of a radical future and a labor party.

Racism has genuinely undermined working-class democracy and power in favor of the meager protections of white privilege. Alongside the placement of occupational color bars by unions to the outbreak of wildcat strikes against the hiring of Black workers, history is also scattered with episodes of anti-racism and interracial unity. From the Knights of Labor, the International Workers of the World (IWW) to the

Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). From the League of Black Revolutionary Workers to the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU), Black Labor militants appealed to white and other workers of color for solidarity.

More recently, in 2004, we witnessed the emergence of the Million Worker March Movement, initiated by African American trade unionists, which assembled at the Lincoln Memorial on Oct. 17, 2004, calling for all workers to break with the two ruling class parties and embrace a worker agenda.

Capitalism and racism go together like a hand and glove

Slavery was capitalism on steroids! It provided free labor by an enslaved population that had no rights at all. Any child of an enslaved woman was born into a life of indefinite bondage. Efforts to enslave Indians were not successful; they could not adjust to the labor in captivity and often escaped to the familiar terrain of the forest.

Free white laborers were scarce and were unwilling to work when cheap land was available — white indentured servitude was an important source of labor in some colonies. But, this limited term of bondage could not meet the growing demand for workers. Blacks could be forced into slavery more easily than whites because, once enslaved, they could not easily run away and mingle readily in strange surroundings. The Land Barons said, “A Black skin connoted, evil, and inferiority; Blacks were said to be destined to be slaves by the ‘curse of Ham.’” They were pictured as savages and infidels from a barbaric, dark continent without a civilization, and enslavement was judged to be an improvement to their way of life.

The number of Black slaves grew slowly in the 17th Century. In 1700, there were probably a little more than 25,000 Black slaves in colonial British North America. Slavery was suited to plantation agriculture and to the Southern economy generally. Slave labor could be maintained at a subsistence standard of living. The offspring of

Black women added to the profits of the masters.

Many of the Africans carried to America as slaves brought with them skills in metallurgy, woodworking, and leather, as well as cultivation of rice and indigo.

Free Black wage earners were members of the labor force before the Civil War. But, from the time white workers formed the first trade unions in the 1790s to the Civil War, no free Black wage earner was a member.

The Colored National Labor Union, or the National Labor Union, was formed by African Americans in 1869 with the goal of improving working conditions and the quality of life for its members. It represented African American laborers in 21 states. Among the goals of the union was the issue of Farmland for African Americans in the South, government aid for education, and non-discriminatory legislation that would help struggling Black workers.

Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, in his book *Black Reconstruction*, describes how enslaved African Americans went on strike during the Civil War on the Plantations in the South. They frequently ran away and went to Union Army encampments. In some instances, they were led back to their plantations.

Du Bois says: "Slaves are workers, as workers constantly struggle with their masters, not only over working conditions but over their legal and social status as well." He gives a class analysis of how the enslaved contributed to their own freedom and were not just bystanders. There were thousands who fought and died as Union soldiers. He draws an analysis that better connects race and class. The enslaved increasingly ran away, took up arms against their masters, and intentionally sabotaged and disrupted global cotton production.

The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters

In 1925, [The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Union](#) (BSCP) was founded by A.

Philip Randolph, an African American radical trade unionist, and avowed socialist at the time. It was the first union led by African Americans to receive a charter in the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

Beginning with the Civil War, the job of Pullman Porter had become an important means of work for African Americans. Randolph was its founder and President, Milton Webster, vice president, and C.L. Delum, vice president and the union's second president. Porters on regular assignment worked an average of 73 hours per week and earned 27.8 cents an hour. In the 1920s, groups as diverse as the Urban League, the Socialist Party of America, and the Communist Party began to focus on the rights of Black workers.

In 1941, The March on Washington Movement (MWM) was initiated by A. Philip Randolph. It was the most militant and important action in African American politics in the early 1940s. Its objective was to bring 10,000 Negroes to Washington, D.C., to demand an end to discrimination in hiring in the defense industry and the discrimination in the U.S. military.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt cut a deal with Randolph unbeknownst to fellow organizers like William Patterson, a Black communist attorney, signing an executive order establishing a policy against employment discrimination as the nation prepared for war. Executive Order 8802 established the first Fair Employment Practices Committee.

In 1947, another March on Washington was planned to end segregation in the military. At that time, President Harry Truman signed an executive order to end discrimination in the military.

It wasn't until Aug. 28, 1963, that a March on Washington took place. A. Philip Randolph led it with the leadership of Bayard Rustin.

The next march was the Million Worker March, which took place at the Lincoln Memorial on Oct. 17, 2004, in Washington, D.C. This time it was initiated by radical trade unionists from the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 10 in San Francisco. The call was for workers, organized and unorganized, to embrace a workers' agenda which includes:

- Protecting Social Security
- Stop the dismantling of public education
- Repeal Taft Hartley
- Universal health care
- Slash the military budget
- National living wage
- Amnesty for all undocumented workers
- Workers' right to organize
- Tax relief for working class
- Stop corporate greed
- Enforce all civil rights

among other demands.

The MWM called workers to break from the two ruling-class parties and to form a Workers Party.

The Democratic Party and AFL-CIO both opposed the MWM. Prior to the 2004 Democratic Convention, a mini labor summit was held in Hyannisport at the Kennedy family compound. It was attended by many labor leaders, including those from the AFL-CIO, ILWU, SEIU, and the Teamsters. There it was established that the MWM was being held at the wrong time. A directive was sent to all AFL-CIO affiliates not to contribute any money, time, or resources to the march, even though they might agree with many of the MWM's demands.

Such a letter was received by the Teamsters. In spite of that, during the Teamsters National Black Caucus (TNBC) in August 2004, the delegates voted to have the International Brotherhood of Teamsters contribute \$10,000 to the MWM. General Secretary Treasurer C. Thomas Keegel, who was in attendance at the conference, said he would get it done. The Teamsters kept their commitment.

In fact, one year later, when MWM held its labor gatherings during the 10th anniversary of the Million Man March, aka the Millions More March, Bro. Hoffa donated another \$10,000 and wrote a letter supporting many of the demands of MWM and its participation in the Millions More Movement festivities. The MWM produced a video and sent a copy to the general president so that he could see Black labor's participation during that anniversary.

Chris Silvera, Patricia Ford of the Washington D.C. Labor Council, and myself all spoke at the Millions More Rally in Washington, D.C. Brother Silvera demanded that President George Bush reinstate the Davis Bacon Act during the rebuilding of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The Act requires that federal dollars appropriated on public works projects must pay prevailing wages to workers on the project. A couple weeks later Bush enforced Davis Bacon on federally funded projects related to Katrina.

Thank you.

A question from the panel:

What is the difference between middle class and working class?

In capitalist America, there is an effort to divide the class by the amount of money you make, occupation, and education. Let's take, for example, my former occupation as a dock worker, a longshore worker. Well, by capitalist definition, only 9.2% of workers in the U.S. had incomes exceeding \$100,000. Depending on one's skill level, job classification, and accumulated overtime hours, a dock worker's pay can well

exceed \$100,000. Perhaps that would explain why you can find lawyers, accountants, teachers, and other highly educated people working on the waterfront. Are they not still working class? Of course they are, in fact, they are some of the most important workers to the global economy.

The middle class is made up of those who are not wage earners, who have their own income like doctors, lawyers, accountants, and so forth.

My point is, if you're a wage earner you are definitely working class. We recently witnessed people in the entertainment industry go out on strike over AI. Big-name Hollywood stars joined the picket lines and refused to go to work. They have consistently remained union members, no matter how much money they make or where they live. They make their income by working the same as those on the waterfront.

Lastly, the term middle class divides workers on the basis of race. Being that race is the basis of wealth, education, income, and other disparities. Folks who have certain occupations don't see themselves as part of the working class. I would conclude by pointing out that a significant number of the people teaching undergrad students are PhDs with no tenure and make far less than many skilled union workers.

Clarence Thomas is an ILWU Local 10 retiree and co-founder of DeClare Publishing.



<https://www.struggle-la-lucha.org/2025/02/27/from-black-reconstruction-to-elon-musk-a-black-labor-history-perspective/>