



Alicia Garza

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“When black people get free, everybody has a chance to get free.”

Workers’ rights activist who co-founded #BlackLivesMatter
offers unions insights from the domestic workers movement

There was a national outcry after George Zimmerman was acquitted in the death of Trayvon Martin and police in Ferguson, Missouri, shot Michael Brown to death. Lesley McSpadden, Michael Brown’s mother and a member of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), called for an investigation of police brutality and harassment in communities of color in the United States. Sybrina Fulton, Trayvon Martin’s mother and an active member of the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), has spent the years after her son’s 2012 death advocating for an end to racial profiling. The night of the Martin verdict, Alicia Garza and two fellow activists created the call to action #BlackLivesMatter, demanding the dismantlement of systemic forms of racism in the country. The project, born of pain and fierce love, has contributed to the growth of 23 Black Lives Matter chapters across the United States, Ghana and Canada. The incredible rise of #BlackLivesMatter is happening as the activist continues to serve as special projects director for NDWA, the nation’s leading advocate for domestic workers. At NDWA, Garza leads the “We Dream in Black” project, which connects domestic workers across the black diaspora, supports their leadership development and cultivates a vision of a new economy and democracy.

Garza’s work—both as a workers’ rights activist and leader of #BlackLivesMatter—perfectly positions her to offer insights into the role that the labor movement can and should play in broader efforts to advance social justice. A brilliant organizer, Garza is innovating by recognizing that winning strategies involve seeing and engaging workers as full human beings with a myriad of identities and issues of concern.

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We're so narrow in our focus in the labor movement. We're just thinking about wages and contracts and benefits and saving the institution. We forget about the people who make the institution what it is.

I consider myself to be a part of the labor movement, but I guess the question is: “Does the labor movement consider me to be a part of it?”

What's so brilliant and valuable about the NDWA is that we organize women at the intersections through a three-dimensional organizing model. Meaning, we don't just organize workers as workers: We organize women, women of color, and immigrant women who are poor, low-income, and working class. We are able to capture a wide range of experiences that really make people feel like this is their movement, and we encourage folks to help shape and lead a movement for all of us.

I guess the other thing that's important to say about whether or not I feel like I'm a part of the labor movement is that historically black women were some of the first workers in this country—both working inside the home and doing really tough labor outside the home, particularly agricultural labor. And so you would think that black women would be core to a vision for a new labor movement that is really rooted and grounded in the experiences of those who are at the margins. That's why I'm so grateful for the

NDWA, and I'm hoping that the rest of the labor movement is able to catch up.

The reason I see my work with the NDWA as so intricately connected with what's happening with #BlackLivesMatter and what happened in Ferguson is that black domestic workers are mothers of children who are being stolen by law enforcement—which is acting as judge, jury and executioner. Black domestic workers are living in communities where black lives are not valued. We are working in economies where black lives are not valued. And we are working in homes where black lives are not valued.

I think that the labor movement is trying to figure out how to relate to black people in this country. In this moment, I have wanted to see the women's movement and the labor movement show up in a different way.

There was a time when black labor was robust and really transformed the landscape of the labor movement in this country. We're working on getting that back. For example, in Ferguson I saw leaders from the Fight for \$15 movement really on the front lines moving labor leaders by saying, “I'm not just a worker. I'm somebody who lives

in this community, who is being targeted by the police all the time—and you have to see that about me.” They’re showing that it’s not just a class issue. It is class, it is race, it is gender, it is geography, it is all of these things that make us who we are. Also state violence, fundamentally, is systemic racism. And that shows up in every aspect of our society—so it’s absolutely a labor issue.

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I’m incredibly inspired by the folks who are fighting to unionize in places like Mississippi. I’m incredibly inspired by the women who I work with who’ve been fighting to be a part of the labor movement. And I’m inspired by some within the

labor movement who are seeing this moment not as an opportunity to lift their own agenda but as an opportunity to actually help build a movement.

I want to make sure that there are more sisters like me who want to make a change and who are committed to that and are unapologetic about it. It’s long overdue for black women to bring this country to where it’s supposed to be. There are so many valuable experiences that we have to offer that can really shape a better country for everyone. Because when black people get free, everybody has a chance to get free. And so given that, how do we re-orient our movements, our organizations, our homes, our workplaces, and our economies to really value that principle and embody it? That’s the big question that I mull over every single day. I wake up to that question, and I go to sleep thinking about that question.

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