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ALEXANDER COCKBURN AND JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

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The Black Backlash Against Obama

By Linn Washington Jr.

After spending much of her 94 years as a civil rights activist, this Washington, D.C., resident is understandably supportive of the Barack Obama presidency because she, like many African Americans, never thought she'd ever see a black man sitting in that Oval Office seat. This 94-year-old bristles at the extraordinary amount of criticisms unleashed against Obama, telling a niece that she'd like to take a sharp sword and stick Obama critics "in the butt!"

Many blacks are touchy about criticisms directed toward Obama, feeling – with factual basis – that Obama receives unfair criticisms, particularly from right-wing conservatives. For example, Michelle Bachmann, the extremist Republican congresswoman with presidential aspirations, blasted Obama blaming him for historic high levels of black unemployment – a rate consistently double that of whites during this so-called Great Recession, which actually is a full-blown depression for minorities and many whites.

Of course, Bachmann's attack was silent on small yet salient facts like Obama inheriting the job-killing recession from his Republican Oval Office predecessor, whom Bachmann blindly supported. And Bachmann's blast blithely dismissed the fact that she and her Republican confederates on Capitol Hill have persistently opposed efforts by congressional progressives to pass job-creating initiatives that would significantly increase employment among all jobless Americans, including blacks. Capitol Hill progressives, including the Congressional Black Caucus, have

"Most People Who have Worked in the Fields Say it is the Hardest Work They Have Ever Done"

The Work Itself

By Frank Bardacke

Here is one of the greatest descriptions of farm work ever committed to paper. Frank Bardacke's brilliant, long-awaited "Trampling Out the Vintage: César Chávez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers" will be published by Verso later this month. I read an earlier draft of Frank's book in manuscript and the chapter, "The Work Itself," bowled me over with its marvelous descriptions and observation. Frank himself worked for six seasons in the fields around Salinas, California.

When Frank asked me for an endorsement of his book, sixteen years in writing and research, I wrote "There's so much marvelous stuff in Frank Bardacke's book that's simply not been done before. At the book's core are the men and women who pick the crops in California's fields and orchards. Bardacke gives those people, mostly seen only in distant fields, a huge presence, one crackling with political vitality: those surges the UFW had no idea were coming; those moments when a strike spread like wildfire across the fields. Here are the farm workers, their skill and endurance, the world they built among themselves, the ways they shaped the history of the UFW. It is their story—refreshingly, sympathetically, and beautifully told—that makes this book stand apart and will make it stand forever." AC.

Behind every fruit and vegetable for sale in the supermarket lies an unknown world of toil and skill. Broccoli is one of the easiest vegetables to harvest because it grows on plants that are about waist-high, so workers don't have to bend over completely to cut the unopened, densely compacted flower buds that people eat. The plants grow two rows to a bed, in lush fields that ex-

tend for hundreds of acres. From a distance, workers, organized into crews of a few dozen, clad in bright yellow rain slickers to ward off the morning dew, seem to be plodding through the plants, hunched over, tiny specks of gold – too few to make an impact on so much green. Up close, any illusion of sluggishness dissolves before the athletic spectacle of the broccoli cut.

The heads of green compacted buds, three to six inches in diameter, shoot off the main stalk of the plant, sheltered by the broad leaves at the top and hidden among the long leaves that surround the buds before they flower. Not all the heads mature at the same time, and only through keenness of sight can the harvesters – most of them are men – quickly find the ones that are ready to cut. The harvester grabs the head with one hand, while with the other he thrusts the short, broad knife downward, cutting the leaves away from the stalk. Then, with a sideways stroke of the knife he cuts the head off the plant, leaving just the right length of stalk below the wide unopened flower. He stretches his fingers to grab another head, with the first still in his grip, and cuts a second stalk. Depending on his quick judgment of the size of the heads and the proximity of the next one ready to cut, he may even grab and cut a third head, while holding the other two in his extended hand. Finally, he throws the heads onto a conveyer belt moving through the fields, or onto a small platform pulled by a tractor, or into a metal-framed basket on his back, as he looks ahead for the next bud mature enough to be harvested. Each cut takes about three seconds; in an average eight-hour day he might cut 11,000 heads of broccoli.

Obama's Record

In the United Farm Worker (UFW) years harvesters often used the baskets, especially when it was too wet to pull the awkward conveyer belt through the fields. They are not so popular now, but they are still used, and when they are full of broccoli, they weigh about 30 pounds. The workers carry them across the rows of plants to dump the broccoli into larger bins, which are being towed through the fields by a tractor. Those bins, four feet high, sit on flatbed trucks, which are already a few feet off the ground. So, the harvesters must transfer the baskets to the loaders (usually two per crew), who are standing on a makeshift platform that extends out from the bed of the truck.

The exchange between the harvester and the loader is done with the precision of a hand-off in football, or the flip of a baseball between two middle infielders at the beginning of a double play. The cutter backs up to the loader, who is hovering above him, and at the exact moment that he feels a hand take hold of the top of the metal frame, he thrusts his shoulders up, giving the basket a boost, so that the loader can more easily lift it up and over the top of the bin. If the loader lifts the basket just a little bit late, he does not get the full effect of the boost – more important, though, the weight of the basket may come back down heavy on the

harvester's shoulders. It is not exactly Melville's monkey rope, where the life of the sailor cutting blubber alongside the ship depends on the care and sense of responsibility of his comrade above him, but when a loader is late, he puts his fellow worker at risk of serious injury. Word travels fast among the pickers, and loaders who don't get it right don't last long on the crews.

Not all farm jobs require equal skill. Different techniques are required for thinning, weeding, or harvesting, for working on the ground or climbing on ladders, for working by the hour or doing piecework, and each crop has its own craft secrets and know-how. It is one thing to cut and pack lettuce, another to girdle table grapes, another yet to pick lemons. Not all the physical skill of farm work depends on the coordination of accomplished hands and sharp, experienced eyes. The work also requires physical endurance.

Farm work is hard not only in the sense of being skilled but also in the sense of requiring toil, exertion, and extended physical effort. When arriving in the early morning to begin work, Pablo Camacho would often say, "*Ya llegamos al campo de la batalla*" – "Now we arrive at the field of battle." Although intending to provoke a smile, Camacho was not being ironic. Most people who have worked in the fields say that it is the hardest work they have ever done. It is hard to put up with the inevitable pain and physical exhaustion, to last until the end of the row, the end of the day, the week, the season. "To last" is not quite the right word. The right word is a Spanish one, *aguantar*: to endure, to bear, to put up with.

Pablo Camacho was proud of his ability to *aguantar*, even arrogant about it, often claiming that he never felt pain while he was working. That is a pose that a lot of farmworkers assume, even among themselves. At work, no one complains about pain. Camacho believed that the ability to put up with pain was part of the Mexican national character, especially evident in sports. Like many farmworkers, he was an avid boxing fan. He could name all the boxing champions in the lighter divisions from the 1930s to the 1970s, as well as recount the ways Mexican fighters had been denied championship opportunities. Mexicans were the best boxers in the world, he argued,

especially in their ability to withstand punishment. They were also good marathon runners and long-distance bicycle racers, sports in which endurance and patience are the essential virtues.

But Mexicans do not have an exclusive franchise on the ability to tolerate hard work. Endurance is a trait of slaves and the oppressed in general, and also characteristic of peasants and other agricultural people – whether free or unfree. Agriculture by its very nature requires patience. Farmworkers have to wait for nature to do her work. They must plant, water, and wait. Weed and wait. And, finally, after enduring the wait, they may harvest.

Physical labor has received bad reviews since people began to write. It is Adam's curse in the Old Testament. Aristotle contended that "occupations are ... the most servile in which there is greatest use of the body." The dynamic relationship between the brain and the hand was ripped asunder by early philosophers, leaving two separate activities: valued intellectual labor (suitable for free men) and devalued manual labor (suitable for women and slaves). This philosophical predisposition against the work of the body had its greatest worldly triumph in the development of capitalism and the factory system. As Marx so passionately chronicled, English factories destroyed English handicrafts. What he called "modern industry" – machines built by other machines strung together in a continuous process of production, where laborers are "mere appendages" to the machinery – replaced the earlier system of production that "owed its existence to personal strength and personal skill, and depended on the muscular development, the keenness of sight, and the cunning of the hand."

The cunning of the hand, what farmworkers call *maña*, remains the basis of California farm work as surely as it is the basis of a major league pitcher's job, or a skilled craftsman's. Many farmworker jobs are not only hard to do but hard to learn, often requiring years to master, and skills typically are passed from one generation to the next. Farmworkers use hand tools: knives, hoes, clippers, pruners. They do not tend machines or have to keep up with an assembly line.

This plain fact has been obscured by all the current references to factory agriculture and industrial farming. The

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confusion began with the title of the first popular book about California agriculture, Carey McWilliams' *Factories in the Field*. What McWilliams meant by that wonderful, albeit misleading title was that California agriculture was not made up of small family farms but rather was dominated by large-scale farm businesses, tied to international markets, which employed a landless agricultural proletariat to do the actual work. Those workers, the book's title implied, should be protected by the same laws as factory workers. But McWilliams never argued, nor is it true, that the actual labor process, the work itself, is like a factory assembly line. That is not likely to change. Agriculture remains dependent on natural cycles and rhythms. Agribusiness cannot escape the seasons, unpredictable changes in the climate, and the natural tempo of individual plants, which do not mature at the same rate. It cannot escape mysterious differences in seed performance, or the interactions between water, sun, and soil, all of which make it relatively hard to mechanize agriculture, and virtually impossible to convert it into a kind of deskilled manufacturing process.

This is not equally true for all farm work. The planting and harvesting of so-called field crops – grains, sugar beets, and dry beans – have been successfully mechanized and deskilled. But field crops take up a rapidly diminishing percentage of California farm acreage, and the UFW never tried to organize the few people who operate field-crop machinery. Where the UFW did organize – among fresh fruit, vegetable, and nursery workers – mechanization has been mostly an unattainable goal, and the workforce remains skilled: people working with tools in their hands.

Broccoli cutting has never been mechanized. Workers pass through a broccoli field several times, selecting the heads ready to harvest and leaving the immature ones for a later pass-through. Agricultural engineers have never been able to build a machine that can do that. This is the typical technical problem in trying to mechanize fresh fruit and vegetable production. Because plants mature unevenly, they can't be treated as identical inanimate objects moving along an assembly line.

Biologists have tried to redesign the plants genetically, so they mature all

at once, but nature has proved to be too stubborn. In the early Sixties, when growers realized that the bracero program, thus their guaranteed cheap labor supply, was coming to an end, they and their collaborators at the University of California began to build machines and remake seeds that they predicted would mechanize farmworkers out of existence. That project has been a colossal failure. Eighteen years of research and millions of dollars were thrown away on the lettuce machine alone. Early schemes involved gamma rays, or mechanical fingers, which would give each head a little squeeze before cutting, but gamma rays couldn't beat the eye, and the metal fingers damaged the lettuce. A USDA engi-

“With a good knife you can work all day without getting tired. With a bad knife you are wasted in a couple of hours. A person who does not know celery, and who has a new knife in his hand – I swear to you, he could not cut a single piece of celery.”

neer, Paul Adrian, finally announced that he had solved the main technical problem: his machine would X-ray every head of lettuce to decide which ones were mature enough to harvest. It, too, was useless: Adrian couldn't figure out how to get the harvested lettuce into a box without the help of human hands and eyes.

Each failed attempt has its own story. The strawberry machine bruised the berries. The asparagus machine couldn't cut the shoots without destroying the ability of the bulb to generate more shoots for a later harvest. The celery machine couldn't cut the stalks cleanly enough to be suitable for the fresh market. The lemon-tree shaker produced three to seven times as much unmarketable fruit as did hand-picking. Most other tree shakers do too much damage to the tree roots, although many nut trees can withstand the shaking. The one great mechanical success is the contraption that picks canning

tomatoes, which, combined with a reengineered tomato, did replace thousands of workers. Otherwise, fresh tomatoes, like most other fruits and vegetables, are harvested by proficient workers making judgments and wielding tools. As the anthropologist Juan Vincent Palerm quipped about the growers' dream of mechanization, “What we have witnessed over the past years is not the mechanization but rather the ‘Mexicanization’ of California agriculture.”

Farmworkers evoke comparisons to athletes – football players and middle infielders, long-distance runners, bicycle racers, boxers – because the centuries-long destruction of craft work is almost complete, and the only context in which people still believe in the skill of physical activity is sports.

At work, Marx's world of modern industry is triumphant, and the wisdom of the idle philosophers whose leisure depended on slaves is completely vindicated: mental labor is skilled, physical labor is not. Only in play and in certain kinds of physical art such as dance do we continue to recognize and admire the skills of the body. The most striking athletic comparison, however, does not involve the graceful agility of the individual worker but rather the collective abilities and internal solidarity of the harvest piece-rate crews. These crews are like athletic teams: they closely coordinate difficult physical maneuvers in a contest that lasts an entire season. And they are professional teams in which everyone is paid at the same rate. If a baseball team worked the way a piece-rate vegetable crew does, there would be a set rate for each completed game, and the players on the field would divide the take evenly among themselves. Crews take great care to make the individual jobs equally difficult and to organize the work so that it can be done quickly. They stay together for years and are often made up of groups of relatives – fathers and sons, brothers and cousins – or people from the same rural Mexican town.

The crews lose a few members every season to retirement or injury, drink or other forms of dissipation, while recruiting new members to replace them, on the basis of extended family connections and ability. The new recruits often work for a couple of years on hourly crews, the equivalent of minor leagues. While working on the hourly crews, new men hone

their skills, continuing to get better and faster, and learn to put up with the physical pain. This is a much different experience from that of production line workers in a factory. (Factory maintenance workers, whose jobs are skilled and often interesting, are a different case.) On the line, a person either learns the job in a few hours or is not going to learn it at all; the biggest problems are adjusting one's rhythms to the pace of the machinery and fighting the boredom and isolation imposed by the task. Working hourly in the fields, a worker has to master the tool in his hands rather than accommodate himself to a machine, and although a person may choose to work alone, he can also work alongside other people – joking, talking, arguing, singing, bitching, philosophizing.

Not all vegetables have extensive “minor leagues.” In the celery, there are few hourly crews. Most *apieros* learn the job as Maniz did. They go to an already established crew, where friends or relatives help them get by until they learn the job. Some people trying to make it in the celery will go to a regular crew and join in the work without sharing in the

pay, thereby both learning the job and helping others get through the day. This is fine with the bosses, because they get the free labor of those trying to learn. There are two rows of celery to a bed, and each *apiero* cuts his own bed, so it is easy for a new man (they are all men) to help the veteran by cutting in his bed, ten or twenty yards in front of him. This is also called giving another worker “a ride.” When the *apiero* assigned to the bed gets to the place where the *raitero* (the person giving the ride) began working, the celery is already there on the ground, and he can simply walk ahead to the spot where the other man is cutting. Both stand up, stretch their backs, and exchange a few words. Usually the *raitero* will then cut in someone else's row, so that the cutters advance evenly.

However new celery workers start out, the first thing they must understand is the knife. It has a short wooden handle, not much longer than the palm of an average adult hand and about an inch wide. Embedded in the handle is a steel blade, one-eighth of an inch thick, eight to ten inches long, and three-quarters of an inch wide. The inside of the blade has a sharp edge. At the end of the blade, the knife widens and makes an abrupt 30-degree angle upward. The outside edge of the fanned blade is also sharp. Knives differ quite a bit, as workers fashion them to their own liking, changing the angle of the bend through their own smithing skills, or by getting a friend to make the desired variations.

The celery knife has its own folk history. Up until the early 1960s, it was completely flat, without the bend at the end. An Oxnard celery worker who had been a blacksmith in Mexico was the first to bend the last two inches of the knife, so that when he thrust it into the root of the celery, it made a better cut at the bottom of the stalk. His improvisation was so successful that he started to buy the standard knives, convert them, and sell them to other *apieros* or to foremen, who distributed them to the men. He supposedly made so much money refashioning the knives that he retired from the fields. The knife company didn't get around to manufacturing the knives with a bent, upturned end until years later. *Apieros* still reinforce the bend with a homemade weld, and dismiss a knife unmodified from the store as *el bruto* – unfinished.

“The only knives that are any good are

called Ontario,” Maniz said, many years after leaving the fields. “I think the steel is better. They come from Canada. They are famous, those knives. But even those knives the people adapt, reinforcing the bend with a weld. Any knife without the reinforced weld is worthless. With a good knife you can work all day without getting tired. With a bad knife you are wasted in a couple of hours. A person who does not know celery, and who has a new knife in his hand – I swear to you, he could not cut a single piece of celery. ...And, you know, the knives are passed around quite a bit. Some sell for thirty dollars, some for twenty. Among friends they are given away. Of course, nobody is going to sell his favorite knife. No. You can't buy somebody's favorite knife. He might give it to you. But you couldn't buy it.”

Apieros talk a lot about their knives. They discuss the differing qualities of the steel, the feel of the handle, and the correct angle of the lift at the end of the knife. When a new man is learning how to cut, people come over to help him out, to teach him how to do it right. After some instruction, they might take his knife and demonstrate, just as a tennis instructor can only talk so long before taking the racket out of the student's hands and telling her to watch. With the knife in their hands, the teachers finally understand the problem. The knife is dull, they say, or it is made of the wrong kind of steel, or the balance between the handle and the blade is wrong, or the fan at the end is too broad or too narrow, or the angle at the end is too steep or too flat. New men might buy more than a few different celery knives (some from the very pros who are giving them instructions), trying to get the perfect one that will make them good cutters. “*Es el cuchillo*,” those trying to learn jokingly tell each other – “It is all in the knife.”

Celery is planted only inches apart, and, unlike lettuce, broccoli, cauliflower and many other vegetables, the worker cuts every piece. Usually the celery is cut with three strokes. For the first cut, the *apiero* grabs the celery with his non-knife hand at about midstalk. He bends the plant back slightly and, with a short thrust of the knife, cuts the piece of celery at the root, using the angled, fan end of the knife. Just where to cut it, and the exact angle of the first thrust, is part of the skill. Every piece of celery is a little

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different, so where the first cut lands varies. Cut it too high, and all the individual stalks will separate: it will no longer be a whole piece of celery. Cut it too low, and the next stroke will be more difficult. Cut it at the wrong angle, and some of the outside stalks will be lost.

If the first cut is made correctly, the worker lifts the celery to a horizontal position parallel to the ground and makes the second cut, a sharp downward thrust with the straight edge of the knife, squaring off the first cut at the root. As he finishes this cut, he loosens his hold on the knife to make a circular motion with his hand at the just squared-off root, trimming away the remaining loose strands and tendrils. While trimming these “suckers,” he turns the piece of celery over with his other hand and then makes the third cut, which trims the top edge of the piece of celery and leaves it about 14 inches long. Then, he drops the celery on top of all the trimmed stalks that protect it from the dirt.

When a worker is learning, he masters the strokes, develops his own style, and takes his time. An experienced *apiero* does the whole operation in one fluid motion, at a rate of about one piece of celery every three to five seconds. People who can do it well are a sight to behold. The fastest cutter at West Coast Farms in the mid-1970s was nicknamed Tremendo. He was not tall: he had earned his name with his massive chest and arms. He had Indian features, came from a small town in Michoacán, and was particularly robust on a job where everyone is vigorous. He was one of the younger men, in his early 20s. Piece-rate crews do not generally have teenagers on them; most people are between their mid-20s and their mid-30s, with a sprinkling of veterans in their 40s and 50s, and sometimes even 60s. Very young men don't have enough endurance to do this work, some *apieros* say, pointing out that long-distance runners (unlike sprinters) reach their peak when they are middle-aged. Others say that the young are too easily distracted to get through a season, or that the only way to make yourself do this work is if you face deep necessity and obligation, and the young have not lived long enough for that. Quite simply, they say, it is a job for family men, not bachelors.

“It is back-breaking work,” people say, and although backs don't exactly break,

back pain is nearly universal in the fields, and back injuries are common. The work stresses the muscles and the frame. From bending over much of the day, the muscles in the back get overstretched and strained. The long up and down muscles in the front of the torso get overcontracted, which is why it is hard to stand up at the end of a row. The overworked muscles sometimes spasm, and cause farmworkers to spend days in bed on their backs or crawling around their homes on their knees. Also, while a worker is bent over, the front of the vertebrae get compressed, which over time causes arthritis. Cesar Chavez's bad back was emblematic.

On piece-rate crews the workers drive

The dominant ethos of the crews, that combination of solidarity and competition that is essential to a successful sports team, had always been useful in coordinating harvest-time job actions, like slowdowns and short work stoppages. It was also useful in building a union.

themselves hard. Celery crews in the 1970s raced through the day, starting slowly as they warmed up in the morning, hitting their fastest pace in the two hours between the 10-minute morning break and the half-hour lunch, and then slowing down in the afternoon. The faster they got the work done, the sooner the workday was over, and the higher the hourly wage. On many days crews worked six hours or less, which was the way the workers liked it.

The pain is why most *apieros* prefer to pack celery rather than cut it. Packing requires constant up-and-down motion, as the packer picks up pieces of celery off the ground and then straightens up and puts them in boxes that ride about waist-high on the large, wheel-barrow-like burro. Up and down all day long is not easy on the back either, but it is easier than the near-constant bent-over posi-

tion that cutting requires.

Packers work three men to a burro, packing behind three cutters. The three have a highly coordinated routine. Two of them work less than an arm's distance from each other, and the third not much farther away. If one man is slow, the others can help out, “carrying” him for a while, but the responsibilities of the three men are clearly defined and conscientiously executed, unless there are special circumstances – somebody is learning the job, or not feeling well for a few days, or hung over in the morning, or distracted by a problem at home. These trios often stay together for years, and sometimes are made up of close relatives. All sorts of informal adjustments and accommodations are made among them, as is required by the surprises of life and work. But bad trios do not last as long as bad marriages, as bickering packers damage the whole crew, and the squabblers return to cutting, or trade places with other packers sooner rather than later.

During the UFW years, some piece-rate crews formed soccer teams and played in recreational leagues, at night or on weekends. Well-paid, skilled, proud of their jobs and their abilities, they were greatly admired in farmworker communities. The cooperative nature of so much of their work prepared them for various kinds of collective action. The dominant ethos of the crews, that combination of solidarity and competition that is essential to a successful sports team, had always been useful in coordinating harvest-time job actions, like slowdowns and short work stoppages. It was also useful in building a union. The piece-rate crews of Salinas were not the only workers who built the organization that ultimately became the UFW, nor even the first. In fact, in the beginning none of the people who founded the union were thinking much about the ways the jobs in the fields had already organized workers, and what that might mean for a union. Only later would it be clear that the character of the work itself was as pivotal in the story of the union as the workers who did it, and as telling as the character and deep background of the founders. **CP**

Frank Bardacke taught at Watsonville Adult School, on California's Central Coast, for 25 years. He worked in the fields around Salinas for six seasons in the 1970s.

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long sought creation of public service jobs for unemployed Americans, like those federal initiatives utilized during the Great Depression of the 1930s and the recession of the early 1970s.

The interesting point is that if that 94-year-old desires taking a sword to the backsides of Bachmann and other Obama bashers, she also must wield it against some black Obama critics including those she's revered, like Conyers who is the second most senior member in the U.S. House and was the first congressman to publicly support Obama's presidential candidacy. Nowadays Conyers' tough criticisms of shortcomings in Obama's presidency, particularly tepid attacks on unemployment, have earned the Detroit congressman icy antipathy from Obama, whom Conyers once mentored.

Obama's job-creating emphasis has been principally with infrastructure renovation projects, funded through his federal stimulus initiative. However, that approach largely bypasses blacks because of historic discrimination in the building trade unions that perform infrastructure work.

Obama's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) stimulus did pump billions into state and local government coffers that helped retain public sector employees, many of whom are black. But the Obama administration has failed to institute aggressive jobs creation initiatives during its first two and a half years.

Despite America's first black president enjoying solid support in black communities, coast-to-coast criticisms of Obama from that seemingly secure sector of Obama's voting base are increasing. Famed figures, such as Princeton University professor Cornell West and Harry Belafonte, plus folks from the rank and file are leveling sharply phrased critiques of Obama's failure to specifically address huge problems in a long-suffering segment of American society, the black community.

"President Obama hasn't talked about poor people who are suffering. He is always talking about the middle class," said Daryl Brooks, a community activist in Trenton, NJ, who aligns himself with the Tea Party out of frustration with black and other political leaders ignoring inner-city concerns.

In July 2011, when Obama seemingly

accelerated his rightward drift, embracing deficit-reducing austerity loudly advocated by conservative Republicans, the Pew Research Center released a report detailing that, by 2009, only 15 per cent of whites households had a net worth of zero or less compared to about a third of black and Hispanic households.

"The highest unemployment rates in the industrialized world are among African-American youth. The federal and state governments are not addressing this major problem," said Brooks, who also criticizes New Jersey's Republican Governor Chris Christie, a politician receiving praise from conservatives countrywide for his attacks against teachers' unions, deep budget cuts that savage the

Quibbling with the words Cornell West uses in his critiques does not erase the Obama administration's substantive failure to seriously tackle the scourge of high unemployment, particularly among blacks.

poor, and tax breaks for millionaires.

Countering escalating criticisms of Obama in black communities, the president's prominent black supporters, such as Rev. Al Sharpton, echo the rationale advanced by Obama himself that he is the president of all Americans, so his addressing issues specific to African Americans would be inappropriate. However, that view sidesteps the reality that Obama has addressed specialized issues important to specific groups, including gays and women.

Obama even repeatedly addressed issues important to his Republican political adversaries. Obama's embrace of Republican demands for deficit-reducing austerity by slashing services to the most needy chagrins many beyond black communities, already enduring disproportionate pain from the GOP's onslaught against the middle and working classes.

Black-owned businesses, historically marginalized in federal contracting, have received a paltry 3.5 per cent of federal contracts funded through Obama's ARRA stimulus between February 2009

and November 2010, compared to white-owned businesses receiving 81.3 per cent of stimulus-funded contracts during that period, according to calculations by Ohio State University's Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity.

That figure for black firms receiving federal stimulus-funded contracts is lower than the percentage of black-owned business in America. Latino and Asian-owned businesses also have fared poorly in receipt of ARRA-funded contracts, according to Kirwan's calculations.

The president of the United States has a legal duty to address discrimination inclusive of contracting inequities that adversely impact identifiable groups. The failure and/or inability of the Obama administration to deal with such discrimination causes black critics, such as Dr. West, to conclude that this president – like his white predecessors – treats blacks differently.

Black bashers of professor West, from Sharpton to West's former colleague, Dr. Melissa Harris-Perry, to syndicated broadcaster Tom Joyner, are particularly incensed with slams from West like his tagging Obama as a "mascot" of Wall Street. Setting aside the tone of West's "mascot" tag, facts do document that Obama received huge financial contributions from big finance corporations during his 2008 presidential campaign, with ten of Obama's top twenty contributors coming from that sector, including Wall Street giant Goldman Sachs and corporate titan General Electric.

And facts also document that the Obama administration embraced Bush's Wall Street bailout without seriously extracting tough (and overdue) reforms in return for the rescue of the Wall Street by the taxpayers, even after Wall Street executives lavished bonuses on themselves with bailout money. That lack of thorough financial-sector reform was a trillion dollar bonus for Wall Street, particularly its financial fraudsters, whether or not it was a presidential payback for those campaign contributions.

Facts further document that the Obama administration (like its predecessors) has been more aggressive in cracking down on street crimes than on the more grievous economy-wrecking crimes committed by the corporate-financial elite. During 2010, the second year of Obama's presidency, federal prosecutors secured the convictions of 3,838 blacks

for crack cocaine law violations, producing prison sentences averaging nearly ten years. However, that same year the feds continued wrist-slap enforcement on corporations facing criminal charges for far-reaching offenses, including fraud and environmental pollution. None of the corporate culprits responsible for those crimes received prison terms, according to U.S. Sentencing Commission data.

Yes, corporate offenders in 2010 paid fines averaging \$16.3 million, but some black drug-law offenders last year received substantial fines plus long prison sentences. An East St. Louis, Ill, businessman received a life sentence plus a \$2.25 million fine for distributing 3,000 pounds of cocaine between 2004 and his arrest in April 2008. By comparison, Wachovia – once the nation's sixth largest bank by assets – received in March 2010 what amounted to a year-long probation when federal prosecutors entered into a deal, settling a criminal proceeding against Wachovia for facilitating illegal money transfers from Mexico totaling \$378 billion – a staggering sum that included billions traced directly to violent Mexican drug cartels.

The amount of cocaine trafficking that sent that Illinois man to prison for life – one and a half tons – was smaller than a single 22-ton cocaine shipment referenced in the Wachovia settlement document. While no Wachovia personnel involved in this drug-tainted money laundering went to prison, during 2010 the U.S. government won convictions against 806 persons involved in money laundering, sending nearly 77 per cent of those offenders to prison. For Obama prosecutors, apparently a too-big-to-fail bank was too big to jail.

Wells Fargo purchased Wachovia in early 2009, a few years after the money-laundering infractions, for \$12.7 billion, shortly after Wells Fargo received \$25 billion in federal bailout funds. That purchase helped make Wells Fargo America's second largest bank.

Quibbling with the words Cornell West uses in his critiques does not erase the Obama administration's substantive failure to seriously tackle the scourge of high unemployment, particularly among blacks. Yes, mass unemployment ravages Americans of all races. However, this dire malady is peculiarly pronounced in the black community.

While the national unemployment rate in June 2011 registered 8.6 per cent among whites, the rate for blacks was nearly double at 16.2 per cent, according to federal figures – figures that curiously undercount actual levels of unemployment. Black unemployment in inner-city sections of Philadelphia, for example, is nearly 50 per cent, according to community activists who tabulate their figures from street-level contacts, not sophisticated statistical samplings. Most of these jobless endure long-term unemployment predating Great Recession-related layoffs.

Unemployment drives other crippling conditions like mortgage foreclosures, which have disproportionately impacted

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blacks in the wake of the housing market downturn. Civil rights leader Rev. Jesse Jackson, during a June 2010 address to black newspaper owners, termed foreclosures and home value drops the largest loss of black wealth in history.

Obama selected the CEO of GE to be his "Jobs Czar." That's the same GE that has cut and/or off-shored jobs through closing factories in the U.S.A. over recent decades. In July 2011, GE announced moving its hub for medical X-Ray business to China. And this is the same GE that rakes in billions of dollars in profits while avoiding all federal tax payments by adroitly exploiting tax code loopholes – loopholes unavailable to middle and low-income wage earners struggling with their tax burdens.

Given the soaring joblessness among Americans of all races, Obama's Job's Czar is not doing a bang-up job.

Often divorced from critiques of Obama is the fact that he faces an unprecedented dilemma beyond strident obstructionism from Republicans, who are willing to sacrifice the well-being of whites to undermine this president. Obama is caught on the horns of America's legacy of individual and insti-

tutional racism – a dilemma not endured by any other Oval Office occupant.

President Obama will receive criticism from many whites if any programmatic initiative appears to them to specifically or disproportionately benefit blacks. Some conservatives blasted Obama's health care reforms by calling them reparations for blacks, despite Obama's publicly stated opposition to the concept of reparations for slavery (a stance that riles some blacks). In fact, Obama's health reforms specifically sought to corral rapidly rising health costs that are killing America's economy. He did not seek to covertly compensate blacks who are "sick" of racism. Obama publicly admits that his health reforms did benefit many blacks but within the context of his governance posture of a rising tide lifting all boats, which many contend is a rework of despised (and ineffective) "trickle-down economics" of the Ronald Reagan presidency.

Obama has directed monies to historically black colleges as part of his efforts to improve education, including expanding Pell Grants for all college students. Obama did support paying the court settlement for the long-festering race-discrimination suit black farmers filed against the U.S. Department of Agriculture, ending a long festering injustice and incurring more bigot-tainted barbs from Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, whites (conservatives and many liberals) banded Obama around for his association with his long-time Christian pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Those critics tarred Obama for Wright's alleged radical theology – a theology ironically based on social justice, the care-for-the-poor principles advocated by Jesus.

Lashing Obama as a socialist causes real socialists such as Ken Heard of Philadelphia to chuckle.

"Anytime someone calls Obama a socialist, or Clinton a communist, it shows they don't know what they're talking about," said Heard, who is active in the Philadelphia branch of the Black Radical Congress. "Obama and Clinton are both centrists and defenders of capitalism. They are not even members of the Democratic Party's left wing."

Consistent with Obama's damned-if-he-does/damned-if-he-doesn't dilemma, his attempts to mitigate white criticism

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result in his angering many blacks, who understandably feel he is ignoring long-festering issues such as structural unemployment and mass incarceration.

Much of the mass incarceration across America impacting blacks arises from this nation's Drug War, which marked a dubious 40th anniversary on June 17, 2011. Half of the 216,706 inmates in federal prisons at the end of June 2011 were drug-law offenders, according to the Bureau of Prisons. Blacks constitute 38 per cent of the federal prison population, triple their rate in America's population.

Federal studies repeatedly document that more whites use crack cocaine than blacks. Yet, blacks made up 78.5 per cent of those convicted in federal courts for crack offenses in 2010, compared to the 7.3 per cent white rate, according to U.S. Sentencing Commission statistics. Obama did fulfill a campaign pledge to reduce the imbalance between powder-cocaine and crack-cocaine sentences, reaching a compromise with Capitol Hill in 2010. That compromise reduced but did not eliminate the sentencing disparity that resulted in many black crack users receiving longer sentences than white

powder-cocaine dealers.

Despite inheriting an unprecedented economic mess, Obama has wasted billions on military activities such as escalating his predecessor's quagmire in Afghanistan. Further, in mid-March 2011, the Noble Peace Prize-winning Obama eagerly joined the French-British assault on the leader of North African nation Libya – a fiasco for the United States that drained \$715 million in federal funds during three months, according to a report the White House sent to Congress in late June 2011.

The money Obama's squandered on attempting to oust Libya's Gaddafi could have covered the entire \$629 million deficit facing the School District of Philadelphia. That deficit produced the layoffs of 3,400 District employees at the end of June 2011, a substantial number of those layoffs falling on blacks.

Journalist George Curry rightly notes that many blacks "do not want to hear anything bad about Barack Obama even if it's true."

This stance of being deaf-to-Obama's foibles adopted by many blacks is not substantially different from whites, who

blindly idolize Ronald Reagan. That late president dangerously ran up the national debt during the 1980s and initiated much of the deregulation responsible for many of the structural fiscal problems facing the country today – problems that Reagan idolizers blame on Obama.

The unquestioning support Obama enjoys among many blacks is curiously similar to the stance adopted by many Jewish Americans who reflexively attack any criticism of Israel.

"Those public supporters of President Obama who defend him at all costs are clearly doing black people a major disservice," stated a commentary posted on Black Agenda Report, a website long critical of Obama. "President Obama and his administration have taken the black vote for granted and feel no need to acknowledge or act on any issues on our behalf."

Daryl Brooks, the Tea Party member, offers a relevant observation for blacks: "We have to challenge the president on issues. We can like him, but we can't give him a free pass because he's black." CP

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