

Blue Solidarity: Police Unions, Race and Authoritarian Populism in North America

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Abstract

With a focus on police unions in the United States and Canada, this article argues that the construction of ‘blue solidarity’, including through recent Blue Lives Matter campaigns, serves to repress racial justice movements that challenge police authority, acts as a counter to broader working class resistance to austerity and contributes to rising right-wing populism. Specifically, the article develops a case study analysis of Blue Lives Matter campaigns in North America to argue that police unions construct forms of ‘blue solidarity’ that produce divisions with other labour and social movements and contribute to a privileged status of their own members vis-à-vis the working class more generally. As part of this process, police unions support tactics that reproduce racialised ‘othering’ and that stigmatise and discriminate against racialised workers and communities. The article concludes by arguing that organised labour should maintain a critical distance from police unions.

Keywords

Blue Lives Matter, institutionalised racism, police unions, right-wing populism

Introduction

In August 2014, a group of academics, business leaders, writers and politicians in the United States wrote an open letter to then President Barack Obama condemning police

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violence against African American and Latino communities. Prompted by the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager who was shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, and whose death sparked local uprisings against police violence, the letter called upon the US Administration to take action to change police tactics and conduct, and to improve police accountability.¹ One of the signatories to the letter was Richard Trumka, President of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), whose endorsement of this position produced sharp criticism from Sam Cabral, President of the International Union of Police Associations (IUPA). This dispute in the US was reminiscent of tensions present in Toronto, Canada, where Sid Ryan, then President of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), had drawn criticism from Mike McCormack, President of the Toronto Police Association (TPA), for his critique of policing tactics during Toronto-based G20 protests in 2010 and for the killing of Sammy Yatim in Toronto in 2013 (Gheciu, 2013; *Toronto Star*, 2010). More than simply ‘wars of words’ between labour officials, these disputes raise much deeper questions about police unions, including in regard to the role of police unions in contributing to current tensions related to racism and policing. These interventions also point to the tensions related to practices of solidarity both within police unions themselves and between police unions and broader labour movements.

This article contributes to this discussion through an examination of police unions in North America with a particular focus on the current conjuncture characterised by high levels of political polarisation generated through the neoliberal politics of austerity, the rise of right-wing authoritarian populism and the emergence of anti-austerity and left-populist counter movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the Fight for \$15 and Fairness.² Building upon several decades of neoliberalism, and driven by the global financial crisis of 2008 and the ensuing Great Recession, austerity measures have been undertaken in many national and sub-national contexts, though unevenly, to reduce government expenditures, reorganise public sector work and redesign labour laws and labour policies (Albo et al., 2010). In this same context, populist movements and populist politicians have risen in many countries, including in North America, on both the right and left of the political spectrum (Thomas and Tufts, 2016). Alongside these developments, and sometimes intertwined with anti-austerity and left-populist movements such as those referenced above, social justice movements, most notably Black Lives Matter, have sought to challenge police violence against racialised communities in both the United States and Canada.

The article argues that, in this context, the construction of solidarity within police unions serves to undermine and criminalise movements that contest police violence against racialised communities and to more broadly counter working class resistance to austerity and right-wing authoritarian populism. Following a brief review of literature on trade union solidarity, the article constructs a theoretical argument that situates police unions within the class relations of capitalism, and also establishes connections between police unions and forms of institutionalised racism. The article then develops a case study analysis of Blue Lives Matter campaigns in the United States and Canada to argue that police unions construct forms of ‘blue solidarity’ that produce divisions with other labour and social movements. As part of this process, police unions support tactics that discriminate against racialised workers and communities and that reproduce racialised

'othering' that stigmatises communities. The article concludes that the solidarity constructed through the practices of police unions undermines and impedes broader working class mobilisation and solidarity. In recognition that the current structures of police unionism are not compatible with working class mobilisation that could counter austerity and right-wing authoritarian populism, the article concludes by arguing that organised labour should maintain a critical distance from police unions.

Solidarity and police unions

'Solidarity' is a key concept for studies of worker collective action. At a very general level, Wilde (2007: 171) defines solidarity as 'the feeling of reciprocal sympathy and responsibility among members of a group which promotes mutual support'. While the term connotes support and collectivity, it contains a dual meaning, as it may also involve practices of boundary construction that are simultaneously exclusionary and antagonistic towards those defined as outsiders (Kapeller and Wolkenstein, 2013). In this study of police unions, understanding the exclusionary dimensions of solidarity is key.

Within the fields of labour studies, industrial relations and the sociology of work, solidarity is generally considered to reflect awareness of common interests arising from a shared experience of work, as well as the collective intention on the part of workers to confront the power of employers and to advance common interests and/or address wrongdoing (see Kelly, 1998). Doellgast et al. (2018: 23) define worker solidarity as 'adherence to principles and patterns of behaviour that support mutual aid and collective action', noting that solidarity is not automatic, but rather is a process emerging in specific contexts that create common interests and common understandings of 'the appropriate remedial action to take'. In discussing working class struggle, Fantasia (1988) captures this understanding of solidarity by noting that '[s]olidarity is created *and* expressed by the process of mutual association' (p. 11: emphasis in original), involving the 'values, practices, and institutional manifestations of mutuality' (p. 25). Practices of solidarity may or may not take formal/institutionalised forms and include but are not limited to forming trade unions. With respect to unions, Lee (2011: 328) states: 'Solidarity . . . is the core source of labour unions' power and social leverage'. Lee identifies two forms of trade union solidarity: internal solidarity, which is that between co-workers within a workplace; and external solidarity, which is that between union members and non-unionised workers.

As per solidarity in general, solidarity in the workplace may also take exclusionary forms. For example, with respect to trade union practice vis-a-vis immigrant workers, Alho (2013: 97) argues that 'the lay distinction between "us" and "them" in terms of nationality still shapes trade union strategy in a way that can be labelled as selective solidarity'. With the rise of precarious work, some unions reinforce insider strategies that protect members (particularly full-time, permanent workers) but that exclude or offer secondary forms of protection for members with lower seniority or those on precarious contracts (Doellgast et al., 2018). Durazzi et al. (2018) note the role of unions in constructing exclusionary forms of solidarity, especially through employer-friendly, 'business union' strategies, which are reinforced by North American labour relations frameworks that emphasise legalistic approaches to trade unionism and that undermine

orientations towards broader forms of working class solidarity (Schirmer, 2017). Bernaciak (2013) documents exclusionary tendencies among European unions in the years following the 2008 financial crisis through the adoption of nationalist oriented strategies in response to the crisis. Though tensions between exclusionary nationalist interests and internationalist approaches to trade union solidarity are longstanding (Thörnqvist, 2014), the current context of right-wing populism has invigorated forms of exclusionary solidarity among the working class, including through nativism and racism (Bergfeld, 2019; Doellgast et al., 2018).

With regards to police unions and solidarity, some scholars argue that police unions hold the potential to become progressive agents of social reform by establishing solidaristic connections with social justice groups and wider labour movements (Adams, 2012; Marks and Fleming, 2006). As will be discussed in what follows, however, the practice of solidarity within police unions through Blue Lives Matter demonstrates a highly exclusionary form of solidarity by constructing the interests of police unions as distinct from those of external groups, and by seeking to undermine the interests of such groups. While acknowledging the need to recognise the heterogeneous character of police unions, including through the presence of associations of racialised officers, such as the National Black Police Association (NBPA) in the US (discussed below), this article raises critical questions regarding the potential for broader forms of solidarity from police unions in the current conjuncture.

Police unions as contradictory worker organisations

Police unions are institutions that are simultaneously workers' organisations within the class relations of contemporary capitalism *and* part of the institutional framework of the capitalist state.³ Trade unions in general hold a contradictory position within capitalist economies. On the one hand, they exist to advance workers' interests in improving conditions of work; at the same time, however, they do so while enmeshed in an institutional framework (which varies by national context) that ultimately limits their capacity to fully resist labour exploitation and undermines any willingness to do so. In the United States and Canada, this institutional framework includes labour laws that, while providing (most) workers with the right to unionise and engage in collective bargaining, at the same time limit the scope of trade union action, embedding unions within legal frameworks that discipline their activities (Moody, 1988; Panitch and Swartz, 2008). Moreover, these legal frameworks largely facilitate workplace-level collective bargaining, supporting and entrenching occupational and industry-based divisions within the labour movement (Jackson and Thomas, 2017). Given the unique role of policing in capitalist society (discussed further below), the legal right to unionise, engage in collective bargaining and undertake industrial action (including going on strike) for police officers is typically further constrained through legal restrictions that are frequently more extensive than those applied to other essential service workers, though such restrictions vary according to national context.

The contradictory nature of police unions is further complicated by the nature of policing itself. Insofar as police do not own the means of production and are employed through contracts that involve the sale of labour power in exchange for a wage/salary,

police can be seen as falling within the broad category of the working class. Like other workers in the public sector, their work is subject to managerial control over core elements of their working conditions, including working time, assignment of duties, promotions and pay. As with many other members of the working class, including those within the public sector, unionisation provides the means to exert some control over these aspects of their work. Given that the majority of workers in both the US and Canada do not belong to unions, unionisation also contributes to situating police in a privileged segment of the working class.

Police are nevertheless distinct from other workers in the public sector given their primary responsibility for the enforcement of laws, and in that they are subject to an authoritarian, command-and-control regime based on a military hierarchy, as opposed to a system of civilian managerial authority (see Hodgson, 2001). As such, the police constitute a coercive arm of the state, along with the military as well as the prison system. As a core institution within a racially ordered⁴ capitalist society, police are intimately connected to the role of the state in producing and reproducing the conditions of capital accumulation. One of the primary manifestations of this is in the role of the police in both regulating and suppressing working class movements. In a study of police unions in the UK, Reiner (1978) identifies their central contradiction as emanating from their role as organisations that fight for better working conditions for those who work to maintain social order. In the US, police forces and policing practices developed in conjunction with the disciplining of working class dissent in the 19th century, as professionalised forms of policing contributed to a more stabilised industrial capitalist order (Mitrani, 2009). In Canada, the formation of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, which consisted of a merger between the North West Mounted Police and the Dominion Police from eastern Canada, arose (partly) out of the Canadian government's desire for a federal police force following the events of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike.

Police continue to play a role in governing capitalist labour relations through the surveillance of picketing and strikes (Hall and De Lint, 2003). While these aspects of policing are largely normalised within the everyday working of capitalism, the repressive role of policing is revealed in instances of mass protests, whereby police forces often implement highly militarised tactics and severely constrain the civil liberties of demonstrators (Martin, 2011). In their role of protecting the interests of police officers, police unions become institutions that thereby contribute to the enforcement and regulation of capitalist social relations and the suppression of movements of opposition, with the contradictory nature of this relationship vis-a-vis other members of the working class acknowledged by police unions themselves (Burgess et al., 2006).

As inferred above, through their role in defending and advancing the interests of their members, police unions contribute to entrenching police as a (relatively) privileged sector of the working class. This can be seen through the impact of police unions on the material conditions of police work, including officer pay and benefits, as well as the protective role police unions play in terms of officer discipline. Police unions may thereby become a source of socio-economic advancement, a site of concentrated, coercive class power, a tendency present even under harsher neoliberal market policies, whereby police unions may shelter police forces from the budget cuts of governments implementing neoliberal policies (Hill, 2011). Though this tendency is uneven and varies

across and within national contexts, it reflects both the power of police unions as well as the fact that a well-funded police force is consistent with a neoliberal policy programme (Deukmedjian, 2013). In the current era of austerity and right-wing populism, this tendency may be enhanced as right-wing populist leaders with authoritarian tendencies seek to bolster policing (Stöss, 2017).

Policing, race and capitalism

Building on an existing body of scholarly literature on race, racism and policing, this article also links the role of police unions to the racial ordering of contemporary capitalism. The early work of the scholars at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the UK is foundational in illustrating interconnections between policing, institutionalised forms of racism and capitalism (see CCCS, 1982), highlighting in particular how the criminalisation of racialised communities in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s provided legitimisation for racist policing practices, which themselves served to reinforce a racialised social and economic hierarchy (Gilroy, 1982; Hall, 1988). These practices took place in the context of the neoliberal recalibration of the British welfare state whereby social policy was rendered subservient to the economy and welfare benefits redesigned with a workfarist orientation (Rhodes, 2000), highlighting the interconnections between racism, policing and capital accumulation.

In the US context, connections between race, racism and mass incarceration have been widely researched, with research linking the gross overrepresentation of African Americans in the US prison system to historical and ongoing racial oppression (Alexander, 2010). Policing practices disproportionately target African American communities through surveillance, arrests, beatings, shootings and the broader repression of civil rights movements (Hirschfield, 2015). The same practices contribute to systems of labour control as the threat of incarceration serves as a mechanism to channel African Americans into low-wage employment (Stuart, 2011).

Recent accounts of policing in Canada have emphasised that, in conjunction with its role in capitalist accumulation, policing arose as a specific form of state violence to oppress and discipline black and indigenous populations. Maynard (2017) argues that the history of policing in Canada is driven by state-sanctioned anti-black violence that can be traced back to the country's slave era. Whether through the criminalisation of racialised peoples in ways that facilitate their relegation to precarious urban labour markets (see Peck and Theodore, 2008), or suppressing forms of dissent that threaten capital accumulation such as indigenous resistance to extractive economies (Coulthard, 2014), policing is central to processes of racialised economic marginalisation in Canada.

With its focus primarily on race, racism and policing, this literature leaves the role of police unions largely unexamined.⁵ With regard to race and trade unions, critical race scholars note longstanding and ongoing patterns of racism within unions, as well as efforts to transform unions through anti-racist politics (see Fletcher and Gapasin, 2008; Larson, 2016), a thorough review of which is beyond the scope of this article. Like the literature on race and policing, however, the literature on race and trade unions gives little attention to the question of police unions.⁶ In what follows, this article examines Blue Lives Matter campaigns to illustrate the ways in which forms of 'blue solidarity' through

police unions contribute to the abovementioned dynamics of racial ordering within neo-liberal capitalism.

Development of police unions in North America

Police unions have a long history in both Canada and the United States, with fraternal police associations dating to the 1800s. Following a broader pattern among the industrial working class in both countries, by the late 19th and early 20th centuries police officers began to attempt unionisation to improve wages, hours and working conditions. Early efforts were met by strong opposition from business communities and public authorities due to fears that unionised police would not prevent other workers from striking and that police forces themselves would strike (Fisk and Richardson, 2017). In the US, a strike of police officers in Boston, Massachusetts in 1919, which was suppressed by the state and met with public condemnation, is considered a pivotal early moment (Slater, 2009). In Canada, in May 1919, a Royal Commission rejected the rights of police to form unions in response to early attempts at police unionism in Toronto (Marquis, 1987).

There was a resurgence in police unionisation in the post-Second World War era, as public sector workers more generally began to win collective bargaining rights in North America. As police unions began to be recognised, however, the ability of unionised police to withdraw their labour was restricted by legislation in the name of public safety. In the US, a wave of police unionism occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, in part in opposition to pressures for greater civilian oversight from the civil rights movement (Rushin, 2017). The International Union of Police Associations joined the AFL-CIO, the largest trade union federation in the US, in 1979, while the National Association of Police Organizations (NAPO) and the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP), the largest police union, remain independent.⁷ As the number of black police officers grew in the US, associations of black police officers such as the NBPA formed to better represent the interests of black officers (Fisk and Richardson, 2017). In Canada, the Canadian Police Association (CPA), which represents nearly 60,000 police officers, is not affiliated with the central labour federation, the Canadian Labour Congress.

Existing studies of police unionism tend to focus on the impacts of police unionism on police wages, and the role of police unions in negotiating working conditions and in shielding police against discipline, termination and civilian oversight. Police unions impact aspects of work, including personnel standards, assignment of officers, organisational innovation, bargaining unit determination, officer discipline and accountability, organisational tenure, personnel development and pay (Walker, 2008). The presence of police unions may also secure greater police enforcement powers and discretion over their use for rank-and-file officers, including in the use of deadly force (Magenau and Hunt, 1996). While police unions and police collective agreements are at times seen as obstacles to implementing organisational change in police forces, research indicates that the position of police unions on organisational change is variable, with resistance most likely encountered when reforms may have perceived implications for officer safety or working conditions (Skogan, 2008). In terms of their financial impact, police unions not only protect police forces against budget cuts, but have also secured increased state funding at times when other public sector workers were experiencing cutbacks (Hill, 2011).

Police unions may also contribute to shaping police subcultures, particularly the ‘code of silence’ among officers (Walker, 2008).

Beyond collective bargaining and advocating on behalf of individual members, police unions are often involved in broader forms of political activity, including lobbying and campaigns (Huey and Hryniewicz, 2012), though the form and extent of politicisation of police unions varies across national context. In the realm of public policy, police unions often act as political interest groups, seeking to influence elections by endorsing ‘law-and-order’ candidates and opposing candidates that support higher levels of civilian oversight (Walker, 2008). They have also engaged in litigation (e.g. by contesting limitations imposed on their activities by the courts), as well as in media relations (e.g. by criticising civil society groups that are critical of the police, such as the American Civil Liberties Union and Black Lives Matter) (Fisk and Richardson, 2017). In the US, police unions have opposed training programmes designed to promote community policing (Skogan, 2008), as well as the organisation of independent citizen oversight bodies (Wilson and Buckler, 2010). In moving beyond workplace-based activities, police unions often mimic the strategies of other labour and social movements (DeLord et al., 2008), at times adopting tactics similar to those of civil rights organisations, including organising interest groups, picketing, lobbying and undertaking litigation, as was the case with police unions in the US during the civil rights era (Walker, 2008).

Going beyond ensuring due process for officers facing disciplinary measures, such tactics serve to reinforce the racialised dynamics of policing discussed above, whether through shielding officers from accountability for racist policing practices or resisting initiatives to improve police–community relations. The Blue Lives Matter campaigns discussed below are illustrative of these tendencies.

Methodology

Research conducted for this article involved a qualitative content analysis of: (i) organisational documents from unions, community organisations and government agencies; and (ii) reports from media outlets. All of the documents were publicly available and retrieved using online databases. The documents were searched on a regional basis focusing primarily on contemporary issues pertaining to police unions in Toronto, Canada and multiple locations in the United States where high-profile cases of police use-of-force have come to light. Documents selected for review outlined the structure of police unions, the central values and priorities of police unions and related organisations, and the ways in which police unions are presented and represented to the public. The documents were thematically coded and the codes were organised into charts that were arranged by region and date. Although initial searches focused on contemporary issues (police use-of-force, Black Lives Matter, police racism), the codes that emerged (union corruption, police misconduct, austerity, anti-police rhetoric) facilitated additional searches that dated back to 1970, producing resources that also contributed to the development of an historical account of police unionism.

Despite the public availability of news media and most labour organisational documents, internal union databases located on the individual websites of many police organisations were private and only accessible to rank-and-file members. As a result, content

analysis was restricted to police statements within the news media and documents that were issued directly to the press.

Blue solidarity: Blue Lives Matter

The Blue Lives Matter campaign arose as part of the police union reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement in both the US and Canada. Black Lives Matter itself emerged in response to police violence against African Americans and black Canadians.⁸ The rise of Blue Lives Matter demonstrates how the construction of an exclusionary form of solidarity through police unions may come into conflict with and undermine other expressions of solidarity within the working class and how such solidarity may be connected to racialised oppression within capitalism.

Founded in the US in December 2014, Blue Lives Matter constructs a ‘reverse discrimination’ discourse to cast police as victims, a wider tactic that has been adopted by police unions in other contexts (see Marshall, 2017). Invoking the notion that ‘blue lives’ are not valued and presenting the police as being under attack through the same rhetorical device used by the Black Lives Matter movement, constructs an equivalency between these movements, thereby undermining critiques of racialised violence committed by the police. Adopting the discursive strategy of a contemporary social justice (re: civil rights) movement demonstrates the determination of police unions to suppress dissent related to struggles against anti-black racism and the racial ordering of American society. By the fall of 2015, there were over 300 Blue Lives Matter billboards in the US (Logan, 2015).

One of the most concrete manifestations of the movement is evidenced by the emergence of Blue Lives Matter legislation. In May 2016, the state of Louisiana passed House Bill 953, the Blue Lives Matter Bill of Republican State Representative Lance Harris. The new law added police to the list of groups protected by hate crime statutes. In 2017, Blue Lives Matter laws similar to those in Louisiana were passed in 12 other (predominantly Republican) states and proposed in an additional nine (Table 1). President Trump, who supported Blue Lives Matter throughout his 2016 election campaign, signed a number of Blue Lives Matter executive orders in February 2017 that enhanced police powers (Lind, 2017).

The legislative gains for police were expected given the support Trump had received from police unions during his presidential campaign. The FOP was one of the earliest endorsers of Trump’s presidential bid,⁹ and during the election campaign had been highly critical of Hillary Clinton. After the Democratic National Convention allowed Black Lives Matter representatives to speak, John McNesby, President of FOP Lodge 5 in Philadelphia, invoked the Blue Lives Matter ‘police as victims’ discourse, stating: ‘We will not soon forget that the Democratic Party and Hillary Clinton are excluding the widows and other family members of police officers killed in the line of duty who were victims of explicit and not implied racism’ (quoted in Allen, 2016).

Blue Lives Matter extended beyond legislative reform and electoral politics, inserting itself into the cultural realm as well. For example, in February 2016, Beyoncé was featured in the National Football League’s (NFL) Super Bowl half-time show. Claiming that the performance paid tribute to the Black Panthers, Michael McHale, President of NAPO, adapted the ‘police as victims’ discourse in a letter to NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell:

Table 1. Blue Lives Matter US state bills, 2016–2017.

	2016	2017
Introduced	California (AB2) New Jersey (A1708; S1686; S2478; A4101) New York (S8212) Texas (HB429)	Illinois (HB1801; HB2487) Maryland (SB120) Missouri (HB86) New Mexico (HB79) New York (A1652; AB2962) Pennsylvania (HB90; HB158) South Carolina (H3184) Washington (HB1986; SB1398; SB5280) Wisconsin (AB48) New York (SB1114)
Passed by Senate		Arizona (SB1366) Arkansas (SB20) Connecticut (HB5297) Georgia (SB160) Kansas (SB112) Kentucky (HB14) Mississippi (HB645) Nevada (AB132; SB541) North Dakota (SB2300) Tennessee (HB835 / SB1342) Texas (HB2908) West Virginia (HB3018)
Became law	Louisiana (HB953)	Maryland (SB42; HB25; HB19) Mississippi (SB2129; HB615; BH747; HB647; HB754; HB646; SB2674; SB2376; HB1359; SB2469) Tennessee (SB6) Virginia (SB1524)
Failed/repealed/ withdrawn	Alabama (HB52) Delaware (SB263) New Mexico (HB95) New York (A10543) Pennsylvania (HB2261; SB1383) Virginia (HB1398)	

Note: A/AB, Assembly Bill; HB, House Bill; SB, Senate Bill.
Sources: Craven (2017), Guha (2017).

You’ve done your part to make trendy and acceptable the symbols of kidnapping and murder of American police officers. [. . .] On the same night that hundreds of officers gave up their evenings with their own families to protect you and your players and fans, you honor them by promoting song and dance celebrating cop-killers. (McHale, 2016)

The police union backlash against the NFL continued through 2016–2017 in relation to Colin Kaepernick, quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers at the time, who refused to stand for the US national anthem as a sign of protest against racist police violence. In the ensuing public debate, police unions were among the most vocal critics. In early September 2016, the Santa Clara Police Officer’s Association, which represents officers who police the 49ers games, threatened to withdraw from stadium security (Perez, 2016). The police protest of Kaepernick continued in 2018 following the announcement of his

involvement in Nike's Just Do It campaign. A statement from NAPO called for a boycott of Nike products, claiming that 'Mr Kaepernick is known, not as a successful athlete, but as a shallow dilettante seeking to gain notoriety by disrespecting the flag for which so many Americans have fought and died' (McHale, 2018).

The racialised attacks on the Black Lives Matter movement through the blue lives discourse is not universalised across police associations, however. In recent years, organisations of black police officers have contested the public positions taken by NAPO and FOP, with some even indicating support for Black Lives Matter (Fisk and Richardson, 2017). In the case of the Colin Kaepernick–Nike endorsement deal, a statement from the NBPA criticised the call for the Nike boycott, indicating that the NBPA understood Kaepernick's protest to be consistent with the right to freedom of speech under the First Amendment to the US Constitution, and that 'the NBPA supports any person or group who exercises their right to peacefully protest against any form of social injustice, including police brutality and racism' (Pruitt, 2018). The position of the NBPA presents a cautionary note to homogenising accounts of race and racism in relation to police unions.

Insofar as the discursive practices of Blue Lives Matter aim to cast police as victims of violence and shield the members of police unions from public accountability for their own violence against racialised communities, collective agreements negotiated by police unions (as well as Blue Lives Matter laws passed by state legislatures) reinforce these discursive practices by providing protection against investigatory and disciplinary measures for officer misconduct. Reviews of police union collective agreements conducted by both academic researchers (Rushin, 2017) and civil rights advocates (McKesson et al., 2016) identify provisions that prevent anonymous complaints regarding police misconduct, place excessively restrictive conditions on the interrogation of police regarding misconduct, limit the capacities of civilian oversight bodies and prevent the retention of information regarding previous investigations and disciplinary history. It is through such provisions that the symbolic and discursive protests of Blue Lives Matter are concretised in material conditions that serve to limit police accountability for officer misconduct and violence.

As is the case in general when police regulate protests and picket lines, the politics of Blue Lives Matter has brought police unions into conflict with other trade unions. For example, in July 2016, at the American Federation of Teachers' conference held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, teachers joined Black Lives Matter activists protesting the killing of Philando Castile by a Minnesota police officer. Two local police union leaders – Saint Paul Police Federation President Dave Titus and Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis President Lieutenant Bob Kroll – issued a joint statement condemning teacher involvement in the protest, concluding that: 'Educators should demonstrate more common sense than rushing to judgment along with radical activists hell-bent on destabilizing our communities' (CBS Minnesota, 2016). In addition to demonstrating a victimhood discourse – where in this case it is the entire community that is under threat by the actions of Black Lives Matter, not just the police – this example also illustrates a police union attempting to discipline another union, indicating the ways in which 'blue solidarity' conflicts with, and aims to undermine other forms of solidarity present within the working class.

Practices of ‘blue solidarity’ that echo Blue Lives Matter in the US have emerged in Canada as well, notably around the decision not to allow uniformed police to march in Toronto’s 2017 Pride parade, a decision that had been initiated by the activism of Black Lives Matter-Toronto (BLM-TO). Community activism around racial profiling and police violence in racialised communities had escalated during the mayoral term (2010–2014) of right-wing populist Rob Ford, precipitating the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the city. Ford himself had maintained a largely supportive relationship with the TPA – the union representing Toronto police officers – and expenditure on policing continued to rise during Ford’s tenure, even while the Mayor pursued an austerity agenda that included privatisation and spending reduction initiatives across the broader municipal workforce (Thomas and Tufts, 2016). In July 2016, members of BLM-TO temporarily disrupted the city’s annual Pride parade to protest uniformed police presence and official police floats. The protesters called for an official local community meeting to discuss Pride’s relationship with the black LGBTQ community, with a key demand being that Toronto Police Service (TPS) officers not be allowed to march in uniform in the parade (Walcott, 2017). In early 2017, with the LGBTQ community divided over the issue of police participation in the parade, Toronto Chief of Police Mark Saunders announced the withdrawal of TPS participation.

The backlash against Black Lives Matter from the TPA was swift. TPA President Mike McCormack, who had actively spoken out against Black Lives Matter prior to their protest at the 2016 Pride parade, advocated that the city withdraw its funding for the 2017 parade. Using a social justice/civil rights frame, McCormack adopted a discourse of ‘police victimisation’ to protest the call to exclude uniformed officers from the parade, articulating the notion that police were being marginalised by this exclusion. In January 2017, McCormack stated: ‘Pride organizers have played right into Black Lives Matters’ hands [. . .] The message is clear, we are not welcome’ (quoted in Levy, 2017). McCormack also made public statements on behalf of LGBTQ officers in the TPS who cast themselves as victimised by the city’s intention to fund the parade, asking: ‘How can we possibly feel appreciated by our employer while they sponsor an event that its own employees have been disinvited from participating in’ (quoted in Janus, 2017). When TPS officers were invited to march in uniform at the New York City Pride parade, McCormack again articulated the Toronto situation as exclusionary, stating: ‘I think it’s sad Toronto couldn’t be that progressive and that inclusive’ (quoted in Lalani, 2017). In framing the resistance to having uniformed officers march in the parade as exclusionary, the TPA, like Blue Lives Matter, constructed an image of their own victimisation, thereby obfuscating the real marginalisation of black lives, this time in the Canadian context.

Debate over the issue of the inclusion of uniformed police in the Toronto Pride parade remains contentious at the time of writing (June 2019). In October 2018, the Pride planning organisation announced an end to the two-year ban, producing an outcry from community members – including the No Pride in Policing Coalition (NPPC, 2019) – that resulted in a community vote in January 2019 to continue to uphold the ban (Casey, 2019). While police unions continue to advocate for inclusion in Pride, police presence is connected to a broader mainstreaming of the event itself (see Walcott, 2018), creating divisions within the queer community and disciplining more radical and racialised queer voices.

Conclusion

Building on a larger literature that links policing practices with forms of institutionalised racism in the context of neoliberal capitalism, this article identifies ways in which police unions contribute to such processes through contemporary campaigns such as Blue Lives Matter. As a practice of solidarity among unionised police officers, the case of Blue Lives Matter reveals how forms of ‘blue solidarity’ constructed through the statements and practices of police unions, while protecting the interests of police union members, serve to repress and undermine broader working class organising, particularly among racialised communities. Blue Lives Matter campaigns invoke the language of social justice/civil rights movements, in effect, casting police as victims and thereby rendering invisible the marginalisation of racialised populations. This is evident in the explicit claims of victimisation made by Blue Lives Matter in the US, as well as in the invocation of marginalisation by the TPA in response to its exclusion from Toronto Pride in 2017. Moreover, collective agreement provisions negotiated by police unions act as shields against accountability mechanisms for officer misconduct and violence against civilian populations. Overall, while police unions improve working conditions for union members, they support the repressive role of policing within capitalism, and construct a privileged status for police union members derived from their role to ensure that working class dissent is contained on behalf of the local or national state.

With regards to broader practices of labour solidarity, these tensions with police unions confront labour movements facing neoliberal austerity and rising right-wing authoritarian populism. Through campaigns such as Blue Lives Matter, police unions maintain symbiotic relationships with right-wing authoritarian populist politicians, who defend police against calls for greater police accountability and who support increased expenditure on police forces while implementing austerity measures for other public sector workers. At the current juncture, this article thus advocates that organised labour maintain a critical distance from police unions. Such a position acknowledges that all workers have the right to organise, but that any union that actively limits the mobilisation of the working class and positions itself above other workers does not hold promise as an ally in the practice of working class solidarity.¹⁰ Dissenting voices within police unions such as the NBPA notwithstanding, broad-based solidarity from police unions is highly unlikely given the oaths their members take to uphold property rights and law and order in the face of dissent. Only when the roles of policing and the legal regimes that accord police their authority substantially change should labour movements reconsider relationships with police unions. Advancing proposals for alternative modes of policing is beyond the scope of this article.¹¹ Leaving that agenda for future research, it can be concluded here that such alternatives are only likely to emerge when labour and social movements are able to disrupt the current order that police unions are designed to uphold.

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Notes

1. Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/ad/public/static/letter/index.html>.
2. This article utilises a definition of populism as a discursive strategy organised around broad appeals to the interests of ‘the people’ and articulated against the interests of ‘elites’ (Laclau, 2005). Left-populist movements are those that employ populist discourse through heterogeneous demands in democratic struggles that contest neoliberal capitalism (Mouffe, 2018).
3. This formulation draws from Miliband’s (1973) theory of the state in capitalist society, whereby the core institutions of the state system are defined as the government, the administration, the military and police, the judicial branch, and sub-national government assemblies. The article focuses on police in the public sector and does not include a discussion of forms of private sector security.
4. For a fuller discussion of this concept, see Goldfield (1997).
5. Within this literature, Body-Gendrot’s (2010) attention to connections between institutionalised racism and police unions in France is a notable exception.
6. See, however, Larson’s (2016) discussion of the US labour movement and Black Lives Matter, which discusses the mass incarceration of African Americans as a form of institutionalised racism and calls upon the labour movement to act in solidarity with Black Lives Matter.
7. IUPA represents 100,000 members, NAPO 240,000 and FOP 330,000. DeLord and York (2017) estimate that over 80% of police are unionised in the US, well above the public and private sector average. In Canada, the CPA represents police personnel from 160 organisations.
8. The movement defines itself as follows: ‘Rooted in the experiences of Black people in this country [US] who actively resist de-humanization, #BlackLivesMatter is a call to action and a response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society.’ Available at: <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>.
9. Trump has been supportive of and supported by a number of unions in building trades and law enforcement (Greenhouse, 2017).
10. This position may be easier for some unions to adopt than others. Firefighters and emergency worker unions, for example, often have long-standing relationships with police unions. As well, some unions have significant memberships in the prison–industrial complex that arguably should also be subject to critical distance.
11. See Rushin (2017) and Fisk and Richardson (2017) for a discussion of labour law reforms and alternative models of police unionism, both aimed at promoting greater police accountability.

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Appendix I

List of abbreviations

AFL-CIO – American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations

BLM-TO – Black Lives Matter-Toronto

CCCS – Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

CPA – Canadian Police Association

FOP – Fraternal Order of Police

IUPA – International Union of Police Associations

NAPO – National Association of Police Organizations

NBPA – National Black Police Association

NFL – National Football League

NPPC – No Pride in Policing Coalition

OFL – Ontario Federation of Labour

TPA – Toronto Police Association

TPS – Toronto Police Service