

The Bottom Will Rise and Create a New World

An introduction to the
International School for Bottom-up Organizing

February, 2009

To the Reader

This is the first printing of a work in progress.
You will read reports from our projects in New Orleans, Jamaica, Colombia and London
in the next edition of this book.

We know that this booklet is incomplete and still developing. We understand that we
don't have much here about the violent conflicts
our people suffer all over the world:
the valiant struggles for justice by poor, laboring people in Gaza, China, Sudan, and
every other country in the world;
the imperial wars that are murdering our brothers and sisters in Africa, the Middle East,
South and Central Asia, and on and on without an end;
the relentless death by poverty that we cannot escape inside this racist/capitalist system.

However, even though it is not complete, we feel it is urgent
to publish this book as soon as possible.
We think our people, our movement for revolutionary change, can use these tools and
ideas to fight back and change the world.
We invite you not only to read them, but also to use them, try them out,
and help us change and develop them.

This first edition is dedicated to all the heroic revolutionary fighters
who gave their lives in the struggle to abolish the slavery of racist capitalism,
so that the bottom may rise and create a new world.

Thank you.

The International School for Bottom-up Organizing

First Edition
Printed February 2009 in Chicago and London

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Preface
December 2008

We seem to be on the cusp of a qualitative shift in the world and in our movement. Three things have happened more or less simultaneously. Two of them we all know about: a new and major financial crisis of capitalism that seems posed to plunge all of us into a deep economic depression, and the rise to power of Barack Obama in the US, whose election has been heralded by oppressed people of the world.

The third development is mainly unknown, and we are subject to being called grossly arrogant for mentioning it in the context of the other two. That is the tiny beginnings of a new type of revolutionary organizing: bottom-led and egalitarian.

The International School for Bottom-up Organizing (ISBO) met in October in Caracas, Venezuela, with a small group representing five countries present. The group included organizers from rural communities in Colombia and Jamaica, organizers working with immigrant youth in England and with survivors of Hurricane Katrina in the US, and young students from Venezuela.

It is our contention that no knight in shining armor (including Obama) will rescue the oppressed masses of the world. In fact, we believe Obama to be only the newest, most sophisticated and disarming tool of our continued oppression.

Our focus is on the organizing of egalitarian prototypes within communities of the most oppressed. We are beginning our work in the Americas, because that is where we are. We have no doubt that there are many poor, oppressed people worldwide trying in their own ways to fight for egalitarian living, and we hope to find and connect them in an international, revolutionary movement led by the most oppressed folk.

We base our organizing on principles of egalitarianism, equal voice, consensus decision-making and the oneness of hue and class as instruments of oppression. We see that those at the bottom of capitalism's heap are the folk with the darkest skin. We think that the capacity to be just is greatest among those who have been treated most unjustly; the capacity to distribute the world's resources equitably is greatest among those who have been most denied those resources; the capacity to share and be inclusive is greatest among those who have been most discriminated against, most left out, locked out and despised.

This is the genius that we are searching for. Formal education might make a person better able to make money, and from the capitalist standpoint, brown people are inferior and black people more so. But the people on the bottom are the greatest geniuses on questions of humanity. The genius that is needed to save the world will not be found in the academy, nor among people who think ideas are primary and practice secondary. The genius that is needed to save the world will be found among those who have been the

most oppressed.

Our school began with a three-day fight to get two comrades from Colombia across the border and to the meeting. It ended with a newborn collective of determined organizers – determined to continue learning and continue serving the people in our various countries and organizing projects. We agreed to meet twice per year, with an action against slavery at one of these meetings annually. In addition, we began the process of setting up fundraising for the individual organizing projects and the International School, agreed to having a monthly online/phone conference, to set up a blog for internal discussion and one for public use, and set up an international travel committee to begin to find like-minded people in other countries in the Americas.

This collective comes out of a long history of collective struggle. It has emerged from the ashes of the old, and was given violent birth in the crucible of New Orleans after Katrina, where organizers had an unprecedented opportunity to turn the most massive racist attack in recent US history into a movement led by the poorest, black victims of the attack, but instead continued in their old paths of self-serving or inability to adapt their ideological mindsets to the new circumstances. What came out of Katrina was a pitiful spate of new candidates for political office or, for many, more of the same type of sectarian party-building work that has failed for forty years to build a movement. But what also came out of Katrina was a small collective determined to understand the harsh lessons of those events. That collective left the US began building the type of prototype we envisioned, and eventually got to the point of holding the meeting in October.

We do not claim any special credit for our discovery of the need to build a new type of movement. We just happen to have been in the right place at the right time to be history's tool and hopefully catalyst for forward movement. Our roots were nurtured in the soil of organizing "local people" with SNCC in Mississippi in the 1960s. We have been part of varying parties and organizing efforts, nationally and internationally, in the 40 years since, and our work together during Katrina enabled us to synthesize our varied experience with the struggle that ensued in New Orleans and come up with a new direction.

We are writing to you because many of you donated to our work in New Orleans; some of you came to New Orleans to volunteer; some of you are comrades from our former parties, organizations and struggles. Some of you we have never met. But we think that you believe, with us, that the "bottom" must lead.

We hope that the documents attached to this letter will help you to understand our focus on a bottom-led¹, egalitarian movement. We welcome your support and participation. Our blog, schoolforbottomup.blogspot.com, will post our documents, reports on our

¹ We have been calling ourselves "bottom-up" organizers. However, we realize that we must distance ourselves from all the liberals and Democratic Party types who claim the "bottom-up" label. We wish to say clearly that to us, "bottom-up" is about building a mass revolutionary movement led by those who are the worst off in any given society. We believe the movement for justice must be led by those from the bottom of society, working and dispossessed people, if we are to truly establish justice for all. You will also see us using the term "bottom-led" because we feel that it may more clearly describe what we're doing.

experiences, and, we hope, your comments, ideas, agreements, disagreements and experiences.

In particular, we have a very great need for “Friends of Bottom-up Organizing.” In the SNCC organizing of the 60s, from which we take much of our organizing method, there were many ways for people to participate. Some folk were able to be full-time organizers; some volunteered their homes for “freedom houses,” where meetings could happen and people could be housed; some helped with freedom schools, organizing training and literacy classes (what we might more generally term political education); some did crucial fundraising work, and helped promote literature and cultural means to spread the word. In today’s organizing world, we must also add internet skills to that list. Currently our “front line” is in the Caribbean and South America, and our main potential for support is in the US and the UK.

We are asking you to take a look at our words and our work, and to see in what way(s) you may be able to take part.

Understanding This Booklet

The documents in this booklet represent moments in time, and are presented mainly in chronological order as written. You will notice some repetition, but also be able to see the development of the ideas. The main documents, “The People’s Circle,” “Creating Prototypes in the Struggle for Egalitarian Revolution,” “The Bottom Will Rise and Create a New World,” and “Some Thoughts on the Unity of Class and Hue” are collective products that came out of our organizing experience and were discussed, revised and agreed to at the meeting of the International School for Bottom-up Organizing” in Caracas in October, 2008. The appendix to the “Class and Hue” document was written in November 2008 to deepen and clarify the concepts in that article. “Towards Building an Anti-Slavery Movement” is a historical document, written in the summer of 2007, that came out of the organizing in New Orleans by the People’s Organizing Committee. It provides background for the decision at the International School to take annual actions against slavery and build an “underground railroad” for modern victims of slavery.

Introduction

To my friends, family, comrades and all the folks who would like to know:

This past eleven months has been an intense struggle: Two cancer surgeries, one in September 2007, another May 2008; the first one for colon cancer and the second one for prostate cancer. One case of dengue fever, two cases of pneumonia, food poison, kidney failure, intestinal blockage at the site of the colon surgery and got diagnosed with lymphoma.

Now this is October about the 7th and I'm doing fine, feeling good and "ready for the Revolution."* I say this with great clarity and purpose. I am ready to spend the rest of my life training organizers to organize among the most oppressed folk on the planet. I have had more than one "near death experience" over the past year and the experiences have given me a resolve to work at an intensity never before known to me. I have a need to be with young radicals, talk with them, share, teach and learn. I have a need to be with slaves and the excluded; I have a need to stop this landslide of oppression falling onto the heads of the dark-hued poor.

During my sickness, a revolutionary woman chose to be my caretaker and political helpmate. During that year of ups and downs, we have written some thirty articles and position papers; held numerous workshops, meetings and classes with organizers; mentored an organization in New Orleans; organized a group in Jamaica and in a few days will be holding a week long organizing class in Venezuela.

A note of introduction: 'my caretaker and political helpmate' is Kathy Fischer: the daughter of Charlie and Sylvia Fischer of Chicago who were the host to Chicago Friends of SNCC group there from 1962-1965. She started her political career at 13 as an active member of Chicago High School SNCC; she has continued her political activism until now. She came to New Orleans and worked full time with us for one year after Katrina and has worked with me since.

I share these stories so that the reader has a context in which to understand the milieu from which this body of work has evolved. What you will see as you read our words is an honest effort to understand how to build a new world, how to build a movement for justice, how to eradicate racism, poverty, slavery, exploitation, etc. In addition, we hope to provide some technology and methodology for organizing the suffering mass, 80% of the world's people, into a powerful force that can stop injustice in its tracks.

The remainder of the words you will read will have had both of our eyes, hands and collective experience helping to develop them. Like Ella Baker, we believe that "a strong leader makes a weak people." Our writing is not meant to build or represent an individual, but rather the ideas coming out of collective practice. Many of the ideas here have been crafted by larger collective input, so often we are acting as editors and writers

* A favorite saying of Stokely Carmichael / Kwame Ture

while harvesting ideas from many. We will try to give you some clues when the documents are written by a collective larger than the two of us.

Thank you.

Curtis Muhammad
October 7, 2008

The Bottom Will Rise and Create a New World
(A Vision of Egalitarianism)
October 2008

Note: This document was written to express the main concepts of the International School for Bottom-up Organizing (ISBO) in words anyone can understand. It was amended and accepted at the October 2008 founding meeting of ISBO.

[Dear Reader:

Some of the words in this paper might not be familiar to you. To help everyone read it, we put the meanings of some words here:

***Egalitarian** means everyone deserves equal respect and justice. Each person contributes whatever he or she can, and each person gets his or her fair share of what the community has. Every person has an equal voice in making decisions. Egalitarian means equality, fairness and justice for all people.*

***Revolution** means turning society upside down, so the old bosses are on the bottom and the people themselves are on top. Most of us believe that the “haves” will not give up their power without a violent struggle. As the old folks say, “revolution is not a tea party.”*

***Revolutionary** is someone who dedicates his or her life to making revolution.*

***Bottom-up organizer** is a revolutionary who dedicates his or her life to organizing the people to take the world into their own hands.]*

* * *

Human society is divided into haves and have-nots. Nearly all people in the world today are have-nots. The “haves” say that the have-nots are powerless, but they are wrong. It is the masses of people that make society change, and always has been. The people on the bottom made all the great advances in society and all the great social revolutions.

They tell us that great leaders make history, but this is not true. For example, in the United States, Abraham Lincoln did not free the slaves. The slaves freed themselves and won the Civil War. They tell us that a few extraordinary geniuses invented everything, but actually the people who work hard, and have nothing, invented everything from language to culture to machines. It is the people themselves who are the geniuses. Everywhere in the world it has always been like this, but the rich and powerful write the history, and they lie to the rest of us about it.

On the other hand, the have-nots *are* powerless when they allow themselves to be powerless. This is also true. The people on the bottom, even though they want freedom and equality, agree to let themselves be kept down, oppressed and exploited. Usually this

is because they don't see their own power or their own genius, or because they have adopted the selfish ideas of the oppressors.

Bottom-up organizing is about building and defending a new, just, egalitarian and loving world by creating organizations that are equal and fair and led by the people themselves. The strategy is that by running their own organizations in an egalitarian and loving way, the people on the bottom will learn how to run all of society and see that they have the power to do it. They will learn that the "haves" only have power because we let them, *and we don't have to let them.*

Bottom-up organizations will begin to govern their own communities or areas. In this process, they will inevitably have to come face-to-face with the "haves" who are now running the communities. This will take many forms, but as organizers we realize that the "haves" are a ruthless enemy who will stop at nothing to keep their power and resources. We see examples of their viciousness, violence and greed all around us all the time. We will be prepared to fight fire with fire.

As organizers build bottom-up organizations, an important part of our work is education. This is because the "haves" have deliberately kept the "have-nots" in the dark about everything from reading to science to history. As we begin creating a new and egalitarian world, the people on the bottom will learn and master every aspect of human knowledge.

People have rebelled and tried to take back the world from their oppressors over and over again for hundreds of years, so we have a rich revolutionary history to lean on. We can learn from our ancestors' successes and from their failures.

Right now, in this period of history, many people feel hopeless about revolution and about our ability to create an egalitarian world, because just in the last hundred years, many revolutions tried and failed, on almost every continent of the world. One reason for this is that the leaders of these revolutions did not have confidence in the genius of the people they set out to lead. They saw a separation between the leaders and the followers. Bottom-up organizing strives to eliminate this separation by training the people to lead themselves and not be followers.

Another reason the recent revolutions failed is that revolutionaries incorrectly identified who exactly are the haves and the have-nots. They did not notice the intimacy of economic class and skin color. Some of them mainly paid attention to class division, and others mainly paid attention to color or national/tribal division. These were both mistakes that ended up misleading the struggle. These were the mistakes of racism and nationalism.

Bottom-up recognizes that class and skin color tend to go together. Most of the haves in the world are white Europeans, or in countries of darker-skinned people, they are often lighter-skinned (sometimes they have dark skin but have the same, selfish, oppressive values as the European "haves"). On the other hand, have-nots are mostly darker-skinned. Almost everywhere, you can find the poorest people by looking for the people with the

darkest skin. This is because of historical reasons, not biological ones. For the past many hundreds of years, Europe has been the top dog of the world and has imprinted the values and prejudices of its rulers on the whole world.

Skin color has become a shortcut to defining oppression. The oppressors have convinced folk with light skins that they are better than their dark-skinned brothers and sisters, and they have also convinced many dark-skinned people of this lie. The darkest-skinned people are outcasts, despised and isolated from those who think they are better. Poor, working class white and light-skinned people are kept down and exploited, too, but they are often blind about who is causing their pain, and blame it on their dark-skinned brothers and sisters. Our struggle to overcome this racism will be long and hard. This is why bottom-up organizers see the need for poor, mainly dark-skinned leadership in the struggle to create a new and egalitarian world. All of oppressed humanity needs the leadership of the most oppressed among us, because it is the most oppressed who can most clearly see the realities of oppression that we all must overcome in order for humanity to live equally, justly and lovingly.

European and European-influenced revolutionaries were defeated partly by their own racism, because they did not look to the dark-skinned people on the bottom for leadership. Instead, they defined them as different, less important, and not members of the revolutionary class. These revolutionaries ended up running nations and becoming the new “haves.”

On the other hand, revolutionaries in the colonized countries (so-called “third world”) also failed to look to the bottom for leadership. Instead they simply defined Europe as the enemy. They were also defeated by their own racism and nationalism, and they copied their former rulers by creating nations run by those with wealth and privilege, who were also usually the lighter-skinned group. They, too, put themselves in power, but did not put the people in power.

Past revolutionaries made the mistake of imagining or creating divisions between oppressed people. Bottom-up organizers see all oppressed people as one. We see the need to build one unified international movement. We understand that it is not enough for different groups to form alliances with each other: we are all one group: the same class of people.

This principle applies to all oppressed people. All over the world, our enemies have divided us into artificial groups based on “race” and “ethnicity.” We reject those divisions and see ourselves as one. Our enemies have even invaded our communities and families to divide our men from our women. This is a very deep division, and we also reject that division. Egalitarian means equality for every person. Women and men are equal human beings, and our unity and respect for one another is necessary for building our movement. Our movement defends women from sexual exploitation and slavery, and from mistreatment by their families and communities, and we look to women for leadership. This was also a major mistake of past revolutionaries: they did not see the importance of female leadership and mainly lifted up men as leaders.

We will struggle against all suspicion, prejudice and disunity, whether they are about skin color, nation or sex. All of these divisions come when we accept the values of our oppressors. This will be a long and difficult struggle, but we know we cannot create a just world without it. *We will build our leadership from the bottom in unity.*

Although we live in discouraging times, we must not be discouraged. It is true that there are more bought-and-sold slaves in the world today than ever before in history (27 million). It is true that those of us who are not bought and sold are also basically slaves, because we do not have the means to live without our oppressors. However, our oppressors are only two percent of the world's people. Their wealth and power, even their military might, come from us and we can claim them back. Their rule can be broken when we unite and organize ourselves under our own leadership.

It is also discouraging that the revolutionary movements of the twentieth century did not succeed in creating the egalitarian world that they hoped for. However, their struggles and failures will allow us to accomplish what they could not. Like a baby learning to walk, our movement learns from its own mistakes. Yes, the baby falls down, but inevitably, it succeeds and walks. Those who came before us fell down. It is now our task and our destiny to master what they were attempting, to walk forward into history and create a new world.

Creating Prototypes in the Struggle for Egalitarian Revolution
A Call for Volunteers for the International School for Bottom-up Organizing
August 2008

How can we build a new world? What lessons can we learn from those who came before us about the potential for a revolutionary movement that will avoid the mistakes of the past? How do we build a true egalitarian movement that depends on the leadership of those most oppressed, the dark-skinned folk on the bottom, rather than on a “savior” or the leadership of middle class intellectuals?

These are the questions the International School for Bottom-up Organizing seeks to study by creating a collective made up of active organizers doing integral work among people at the bottom anywhere in the world.

In the world today, two percent of humanity has come to oppress and exploit the great majority, and has created governing structures that enforce and maintain their control. The entire world is under the control of the rich and powerful, mostly fair-skinned, mostly male. We know from experience that we can't "fix" the two percent; the people will have to build a new world and fight power with power. In so-called “primitive” times, the mass ruled and kept the greedy two percent in line. Somehow, hidden by the mists of unwritten time, that was turned on its head. All of recorded history has been the struggle of the masses to seize the world back from the grasp of the greedy few and achieve a society based on equality.

For the past hundred and fifty years or so, that struggle has been particularly intense all around the world, and numerous revolutions have occurred. However, those courageous attempts at abolishing oppression were reversed, and we are left to face the same struggle as our predecessors and ancestors did. If anything, a deep cynicism has been the product of these attempts to transform society.

Many of our people have come to believe that it is hopeless to fight those in power. They have even come to accept some of the intense propaganda our enemies have created to make us feel that we are too stupid to be capable of creating and running our own society, or even our own organizations. This is especially true of those at the bottom of society, who are the poorest and darkest-skinned, including those who are working, unemployed or in the so-called informal economy. Women are victimized and children voiceless. Perhaps this hopelessness helps explain why so many have latched onto the illusion of a “knight in shining armor” exemplified by the Obama phenomenon.

But we realize that we will not be rescued from the top. Our new world is about the bottom rising up, expressing its genius, and leading us into an egalitarian future. This will not happen spontaneously, but only through the diligent, persistent, courageous efforts of honest, committed organizers over a very long period of time.

How can we move from where we are now toward creating a new struggle for an egalitarian future?

We think that what is needed is for those who are most oppressed, and who most desperately need it, to begin creating prototypes of the society we need for our liberation. By prototypes, we don't mean isolated utopian communes. We mean to create organizations that will take on the needs of the most oppressed and that will function on the basis of love, respect and equality: each person will work and give according to their abilities and commitment, and the collective will take care of the whole community based on egalitarian spirit and need, not greed. Everyone will have equal voice, and decisions will be made by consensus.

What forms these groupings will take, what they will do, how they will relate to each other are not questions we can answer with great clarity until they begin to form and create a practice of their own. However, from participating in the movement over the last fifty years, we have developed some ideas. (See "The Bottom Will Rise," "The People's Circle," and "Some Thoughts on the Unity of Class and Hue.")

One thing that is clear to us is that ours is an international struggle that must be led by the poorest and darkest, especially women. Oppression by race, class and gender crosses all national boundaries. We all need the same freedom and equality; we all have the same oppressors, worldwide. Our movement will work toward an internationalist, egalitarian world. We foresee a world in which the genius and creativity of humanity is unleashed, in which all humans share and share alike, whether in starvation or in plenty: in which we are free to love and truly take care of one another.

This vision will not happen by itself. The goal of the International School for Bottom-up Organizing is to create organizers who are visionaries and scientific thinkers, organizers who are catalysts for bottom-up organizing, and to connect and create communication between the groups they help set in motion. If the brief ideas set out in this document strike a chord in your heart, and you are ready for a life-long commitment, we hope you will respond to this call and help craft a new liberation movement.

The People's Circle Meeting

May 2007

Note: The People's Circle is a method of meeting that provides for equal voice and consensus decision-making. We share it so that readers can adapt and use it to build bottom-up organizations.

Purpose: to conduct a meeting that is fair and equal so poor and working people can control their own organization and develop their own power

Equality: Everyone has equal voice and gets the same time to speak. No one can dominate the meeting. When a person is talking, everyone else is LISTENING, not talking, or agreeing, disagreeing or asking questions. Not even planning what he or she will say on his turn. When the group is large, we break into small groups (about 8 people) so everyone's voice can be heard equally. We always sit in a circle so everyone can see and hear each other clearly.

Fairness: No person is more important than any other person. The meeting is planned so everyone who wants to come can come. Organizers help with transportation, food, childcare, and assistance for elderly or disabled participants, etc., to eliminate any obstacles people may face in coming to the meeting.

Conduct of the Meeting:

Opening: We open with a cultural or spiritual offering to start off the meeting with unity, respect and love. It is especially good if children can do the opening by performing a song, poem or prayer. (Note: it is important to remember that not everyone has the same religious beliefs and practices. Not everyone is a Christian, for instance. Depending where the organization is, you may have Christians, Jews, Muslims, Rastafarians, spiritualists, and agnostics. The offering should respect all beliefs.)

Introductions: The Facilitator introduces him/herself and explains the history and principles of the group if there are newcomers. Each person in the circle introduces himself or herself briefly.

Reports: The Facilitator or another Organizer reports briefly on decisions made at the previous meeting. The Organizing Team and Committees report briefly on their activities since the last meeting. The Treasury Committee reports on the financial status.

Agenda: The Facilitator presents the agenda as planned by the Organizing Team. The first item on the agenda is often a thought-provoking question to put people in a positive and creative frame of mind. It is best if the agenda can be written on a blackboard or large paper so everyone can see it. The Facilitator then asks the assembled if they have other items to add to the agenda, and writes the additional items on the agenda. The first item is read off and discussion starts.

Participation: Everyone in the meeting has equal time to speak. For each topic, the group

decides how long each person will have to speak (for example, 1 minute, 2 minutes, etc.) in each round. Once the topic or question is stated, whoever is ready to speak can start. The speaking then goes around the circle one by one. If a person is not ready to speak, they can pass. When the round is finished, anyone who passed has a chance to speak. If people want another round on the same topic and there is time, they go around again. The idea is NOT to respond to what someone else said, but just to say what you think.

Small groups: If 15 or more people are at the meeting, small groups should discuss each topic to give everyone more time to speak. Rounds are conducted in the small groups. One person in each group should report out their agreements and ideas to the whole group after each topic is discussed. To form small groups, simply have people count off and put the “ones” in a small circle, the “twos” in another small circle, etc. as needed.

Cross talk: Once everyone has spoken in the rounds, the group can agree on a time for cross talk (for example, 5 minutes, 15 minutes, etc.). During cross talk, the facilitator calls on people who raise their hands. In cross talk, people can ask each other questions to make sure they have understood each other, and people can agree or disagree with one another’s ideas. Some agenda items require cross talk and others do not. Normally cross talk is for important items, and normally it takes place in the whole group.

Finding agreements: As people are speaking, everyone is listening for agreements about plans. What does everyone seem to think is a good thing to do? Disagreements are fine, and can help us understand each other and learn, but we will not act on things we disagree on, so we are especially listening for places where we have unity.

Decision-making: We make decisions by consensus. We do not vote. We don’t have winners and losers. Whatever agreements we come to in our meeting, we plan how to carry them out. Whatever we do not agree about, we continue to discuss in another meeting and with one another between meetings. We move as one united force.

Ending the Meeting: When the agenda is finished or time is up, the Facilitator should review agreements, review tasks and who volunteered to do them, and state the time and place of the next meeting. Also, the Facilitator or another OT member should announce the time and place of the OT meetings and remind people that this is THEIR organization, and leadership is on a voluntary basis, and they are invited to be on the Organizing Team if they have the time and commitment to do so.

Finally, the meeting should end with a cultural or spiritual offering. One of the best ways to do this is for all to stand and sing a unifying song together.

Jobs in the meeting:

Facilitating: To facilitate something means to make it go easily and smoothly. The person who chairs the meeting is called the facilitator. He or she is not the “leader” of the organization. His/her job is to enforce that the meeting is conducted in a fair, just and equal way. If we break into small groups, there is a facilitator in each group. The

facilitator makes sure that everyone has equal chance to speak.

A KEY task for the facilitator is to listen for agreements in the meeting. After discussion, the facilitator should say, “I think I heard agreement about XYZ. Let’s have a quick round about what agreements we heard and what we want to do before the next meeting.” If possible, write the agreements at the front of the meeting.

When agreements are clear, ask for volunteers to do the tasks that need to be done before the next meeting. Write the names next to the tasks.

Note taking: Someone should volunteer at the beginning of each meeting to take careful notes and turn them in to the Organizing Team at the end of the meeting. If the group breaks into smaller groups, someone in each group needs to take notes. This does not need to be the same person each time, but someone on the Organizing Team should be responsible for typing and keeping all the notes. (Someone should take notes in Committee meetings and turn them in as well.)

Timekeeping: One person in the large group and in each small group should keep time when people are talking. When the agreed time limit is reached (for instance, 2 minutes per speaker), the timekeeper should give a signal so the speaker can finish their sentence and let the next person speak. In cross talk, the timekeeper should signal when the agreed time for cross talk has ended.

Sign-up: A member of the Organizing Team should send around a sign-up sheet at each meeting to get everyone’s name, community address, phone number and e-mail address if available. Make sure that any latecomers sign in as well.

Keeping the agenda: If there is a blackboard or large paper available, someone should volunteer to write agenda items, agreements and task volunteers on it so the Facilitator does not have to.

Organizers’ jobs in the meeting: All OT members should help the meeting run smoothly. They should set chairs in a circle and set out snacks before the meeting starts. During the meeting, they should make sure people are comfortable, greet latecomers quietly, sign them in, and help them to a seat in the circle, assist elderly or disabled persons, etc. They should enforce that the seats stay in a circle, and that people do not talk out of turn in the meeting, but they should do these tasks politely and respectfully. This is the people’s meeting! They may also need to facilitate if the meeting breaks into small groups. After the meeting, they should look out for people’s transportation needs if possible, chat with people in a friendly way, and encourage people to come to the next meeting.

Some Thoughts on the Unity of Class and Hue

December 2008

Note: This work-in-progress was discussed and accepted at the October 2008 founding meeting of ISBO. Suggested changes and explanations were added in the Appendix to the document. We hope this paper will provoke practice and discussion that will enable all of us to come up with a more scientific understanding of class and “race,” and do a much better job of defeating racism than we’ve done so far.

Introduction

The intersection of class and hue has been the subject of much discussion and debate probably at least since the time of the Haitian Revolution, certainly since the Russian Revolution. While this paper does not claim to be expert on that historical discussion, it is an attempt to look at how liberation movements in the past have seen the relationship of class and hue, and how to learn from their mistakes, while honoring and learning from their struggles. The views expressed here are undoubtedly imperfect and need to be developed, but hopefully collective practice, discussion and research will help move our understanding forward, and thereby our effectiveness at building the movement to create an egalitarian world. In that spirit, we submit the following thoughts for discussion.

Background

Since the rise of Europe to dominate the world several hundred years ago, exploitation of the masses of working people has been color-coded. (We are not attempting to address earlier human history.) As part and parcel of colonialism and slavery, the ruling classes held up people with the white skin of Europeans as superior to those with the darker skins of Africans, Asians and indigenous peoples of the Americas and Australia. European traders made themselves rich in the vicious trade in African slaves, the rape of indigenous American civilizations, and the exploitation of African and indigenous labor. They used this wealth to make the Industrial Revolution possible, and to make capitalism the dominant economic system and themselves the rulers of it. In a short time, they developed the thoroughgoing racist ideology we’re all familiar with. Capitalism and racism were born together and are inseparable. The hierarchy of color and the cultural beliefs that support it were consolidated even before the capitalist system was fully consolidated. They rose together and will fall together: one cannot be defeated without the other. *Perhaps it is a mistake to even think of them as two separate processes.*

We suggest that revolutionaries in the last two hundred years have made two major errors in understanding the intersection of race and class. One mistake saw race as simply a tactic of class division, the other placed race (tribe, nation) primary over class. Both errors separate class and color, treating them as distinct processes, so they are two sides of the same coin.

Note: we prefer to use the word “hue” to the word “race,” because scientifically there is only one race of humans. The fact that, in general, lighter-skinned people are better off

than darker-skinned people is not natural: there is no biological reason why people are racist or why some people are “higher” than others under capitalism. The reason is based on history. Had Europeans not been visibly different in skin color from the rest of the world’s people, the capitalists would undoubtedly have come up with some other marker. But skin color worked out well for them, so they used it and it has endured.

The reality of capitalism is that, nearly everywhere in the world, the poorest people also have the darkest skin. The Indians marooned by floodwaters last month are as dark as sub-Saharan Africans, while the majority of the Indian ruling class is nearly as light as Europeans. The poorest in Central and South America are those with the most African and indigenous heritage: the darkest skins. In Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, the aboriginal people. In the African diaspora, the social hierarchy goes from light (top) to dark (bottom). In Europe and the US, people of African descent at the bottom, then other brown-skinned people, then white poor and working people, and white capitalists at the top. If you tuned in to the news coverage of Katrina in New Orleans and didn’t know better, you would have thought you were looking at Haiti or sub-Saharan Africa. (Note: the ruling classes are smart enough to realize they can no longer be too openly racist, so they promote dark-skinned people who are loyal to them into positions of leadership. This is not anti-racism; it is an attempt to mislead people into thinking racism is “getting better,” and to get us to be loyal to our own oppressors.)

Since only about 2% of the world’s population runs the world, and they have a small number of loyal supporters who work directly for them, at least 80% of the world’s people, of all hues, are severely oppressed, exploited and need to liberate themselves. This includes many white poor and working folk in Europe and North America. Unfortunately for all of us, nearly all white people have a serious problem with racism that prevents them from looking to dark-skinned people for unity and leadership. Brown-skinned people often have the same problem of looking down on darker people. Anyone with their eyes open sees that light skinned people are better off on average, and comes to their own conclusions about why. White people often conclude they are superior, and dark people often conclude there is something wrong with them. Both of these ideas are crippling. We cannot deal with this by simply saying “fight racism, build multi-racial unity,” especially if the people leading the way are mainly light-skinned people. Because of racism, if people other than those with the darkest skin are the predominant leaders of a movement, the bottom will be left out, racism will be reinforced, and the movement is destined to fail. All oppressed people NEED the leadership of the bottom, the darkest-hued of us.

The Mistake of the Communist Movement: Class over Hue

Communist parties have taken a leading role in opposing racism and trying to build unity between working class people of all hues. Their theoretical understanding of hue and class has varied, and has changed over the past hundred years. Most parties have supported nationalism (see below). A few have seen that nationalism does not advance the struggle. Many have analyzed racism as primarily a tactic of the capitalists to divide and conquer the working class, and have pointed to the more intense exploitation suffered

by darker-skinned workers. However, even the most progressive of them have not understood the vital necessity for leadership from the bottom, and have therefore not been able to create mass parties or consolidate dark-skinned members and leaders in large numbers. We suggest that this is, at least in part, because they think of hue as distinctly secondary to class, or underestimate the unity of hue and class.

Why does the left have such difficulty understanding and addressing the inseparability of hue and class? We suspect that the problem may have its roots in the fact that early communist theory, although it was the most advanced and scientific understanding of capitalism and often had the most to offer the struggling masses, was developed in 19th Century Europe, which by then was saturated with three hundred years of racist culture. This led it not to take into account the experience and struggles of darker-skinned people. This blindness is evident in the first line of the Communist Manifesto: “a spectre is haunting *Europe* -- the spectre of communism.”

Marx and Engels were products of the prevailing culture of their time, which held that European people, as well as the European economy and politics, were more advanced than the rest of the oppressed and exploited people of the world. Simultaneously, they were the most radical, most revolutionary thinkers in the Western world. They gave us an analysis of wage slavery and capitalism that allowed for the great revolutions of the 19th and 20th centuries. They handed down to us the science of dialectical and historical materialism that has enabled subsequent revolutionaries, including ourselves, to understand the world and advance the theory of revolution based on the practice of struggle in which we are involved. They gave us tools that have allowed us to move beyond their own limitations, which are nowhere more apparent than in their misunderstanding of the relationship between hue and class, and of the essential oneness of all of the oppressed masses regardless of “race.”

By the time of Marx and Engels, the world economy was already to a great extent interconnected. Slaves in the Americas and “free” (wage-slave) workers in the colonies produced the raw materials that supplied the factories of Europe and North America. But M&E did not consider these workers part of the international working class, despite the fact that their labor was an integral part of the capitalist economy. It is true people worked in factories in Europe, and in fields and mines in the colonies, but labor in both places was in service of the capitalists. It is one thing to describe the differences in labor organization between a cotton plantation and a textile factory. It is another to posit a qualitative difference in class and class interest between the worker who picked the cotton in Mississippi and the one who operated the loom in England, the one who cut the cane in Jamaica and the one who distilled the rum in Boston, the one who tapped the tree in Congo and the one who made the rubber products in Belgium. We think it is possible that M&E’s analysis ignored the struggles and experience of the majority of the working class, and considered factory work most important, because they couldn’t see hue as an essential part of the class structure.

This blindness to the role of hue was caused by the racist culture in which they existed. The cotton picker, the cane-cutter and the rubber-gatherer in the examples above were

Africans, who, as Darwinian anthropological “data” at the time “proved,” and M&E believed, were lower on the evolutionary tree than Europeans. (Engels refers to dark-skinned people in these terms: “The lowest savages, even those in whom regression to a more animal-like condition with a simultaneous physical degeneration can be assumed,” and he says that the migration of humans to colder climates created new physical and mental challenges which “further and further separated man from the animal.” As to the accomplishments of the highest evolutionary development, they belonged to pale-hued Europeans: “have given the human hand the high degree of perfection required to conjure into being the pictures of a Raphael, the statues of a Thorwaldsen, the music of a Paganini.” Quotes from *The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man*)

Marx, Engels, and early Marxists regarded the heroic struggles of exploited slave and colonial workers as outside the working class experience, and didn’t think they needed to understand them in order to understand how to overcome capitalism. They could not imagine non-European laboring people as possible leaders. For example, at the end of the U.S. Civil War, the International Workingmen’s Association led by Marx thanked Abraham Lincoln, as a “son of the working class,” for freeing the slaves. Even though Marx covered the Civil War up close as a news correspondent, he couldn’t see that it was the *slaves*, by rising up en masse and taking up arms against the Confederacy, who had *rescued Abraham Lincoln and the Union Army* – not the other way around.

While M&E saw the significance of the experiment in egalitarianism of the Paris Commune in the 1870s, they overlooked the significance of the experiment in egalitarianism being carried out by former slaves and poor whites in the U.S. South in the same decade (Reconstruction). Both experiments ended when the former rulers re-took their territories by force. The lessons of the one were analyzed, recorded for posterity and frequently taught amongst revolutionaries; the lessons of the other can only be discovered by research, many of the details lost, and are rarely taught on the left.

M&E proposed that industrial capitalism would be a step forward for the colonies, and the colonial masses should fight for it. So darker-hued people had to step to a “higher” level of exploitation and oppression, not fight for freedom from capital, as European (white) workers should.

This thinking laid the basis for the “national question,” in Lenin’s generation and after, which produced a blind alley for the struggle to end exploitation in the colonies. Even communist revolutionaries in the colonies fought for independent capitalist governments as a necessary step before workers would be “ready” to fight *another* bloody revolution for socialism and communism.

The idea that European industrial workers were destined to be the leaders of the revolution did not turn out to be true. M&E predicted that the “most advanced” workers in the “most advanced” country – that is, industrial workers in England – would be the first to overthrow capital. In fact, British workers weren’t more advanced than other workers (and could have taken a page from what the slaves were doing in Britain’s colonies and former colonies). The most “backward,” least industrialized, least

“European” country in Europe, Russia, experienced the first anti-capitalist revolution to consciously apply the theories set forth by M&E. The next major communist revolution wasn’t made anywhere near Europe, but in a former colony: China. In both cases, the revolutionary armies were overwhelmingly composed of agricultural workers (“peasants”) rather than industrial workers.

The laboratory of the class struggle has disproved the theory that industrial workers are the key force necessary or destined to lead the revolution for liberation of humanity from oppression. That theory may have its roots in M&E’s blindness to the unity of hue and class.

Because of the profound and history-changing nature of their work, perhaps it is understandable that subsequent communists have overlooked Marx’ and Engels’ shortcomings. However, we need to understand that both the correct and the incorrect aspects of their work left enduring marks on our movement.

Of course, in the century and a half since M&E wrote, the communist movement has moved away from their evolutionary racism, embraced workers of all hues as members of the same class, and often stood in the forefront of the fight against racism. However, its understanding of the role of hue still hasn’t completely overcome the errors of its founders. How would communist theory and experience be different today if Marx and Engels had written extensively about the significance of the Haitian Revolution, which happened just over a generation before the Communist Manifesto, about its reverberations in the colonies and the “mother countries” alike? And about the revolution against slavery in the US; about the experiments in egalitarian living led by former slaves in the U.S. South (which included some poor whites), and among maroon communities throughout the Americas, for instance? What if they had called on European workers to follow the leadership of those movements of dark-skinned working people, take up arms against their own oppressors, and organize life in a communal way – can we imagine how the history of our movement and the world might have been different? Instead, objectively though not intentionally, M&E reinforced racism among European workers by reinforcing the idea that they were the most advanced in the world and destined to be the saviors of the oppressed masses, which was like a reflection of the “white man’s burden” idea promoted by the colonialists.

The Second Error: Nationalism

Those who put hue, ethnicity, nationality or tribe primary over class also make the mistake of separating the inseparable. In today’s world, poor and working people are shedding each other’s blood by the barrel in the name of identifying with nationality or religious affiliation.

The concept of a nation came into being when the capitalist class began to defeat the feudal system. The bourgeois revolutions, which happened first in Europe, united previously separate fiefdoms or clans into the nations of France, England, Prussia, etc. For example, several hundred languages were spoken in the area that became France, and

when the bourgeoisie took power, they outlawed most of those languages and declared French the “national” language and invented the idea of a French nation and nationality. The idea of “fighting for one’s country” began to be promoted, instead of the previous forced loyalty to one’s feudal lord, clan leader, etc. Nationalism is a capitalist concept of organizing the world, and it serves the class that holds power within particular geographic areas: French capitalists in France, US capitalists in the US, Nigerian capitalists in Nigeria, etc. A key function of nationalism is to get the oppressed people to be loyal their “own” oppressors.

Within the movement against oppression, nationalism had two sets of promoters. In the colonized countries fighting for independence from imperialism in the 20th Century, you had the native capitalists (or aspiring capitalists) of the colonies themselves, who wanted what the Europeans had: the license to exploit “their” people for profit, and to control state power in their country (which in most cases had been defined as a country by colonial powers, who drew borders around “countries” that each of them had conquered).

More problematic for the people, though, *the revolutionaries who wanted to end exploitation also became nationalists*. Many of them were part of the international communist movement, which, as mentioned above, had defined the suffering masses in the colonies as at a different level of historic development than workers in Europe. From this analysis, they proposed a different goal in the colonies than in Europe. In Europe, they fought to overthrow the system of capitalism and put the laboring masses in power once and for all, but in the colonies they fought for national independence, which they saw as a necessary step before colonial peoples would be ready to fight for socialism and an end to class oppression.

The reality was that, once national liberation had been achieved, the leaders of the movement became the new capitalists, even the ones who had called themselves communists. The old revolutionary movements became parties in power, and did not continue the fight against oppression. (The most recent example of this is South Africa.)

Black nationalism is a reflection of this same trend. Because of the weaknesses in understanding hue and class within the left/socialist/communist movement in places like the US, that movement has historically been mainly white-led and suffered from internal racism, even as it fought against racism. As a result, it was never able to attract and include the masses of poor and working class black folk. The left in the US often promoted the idea that black people within the US were like a colony and should fight for their own nation. Black nationalism rose as a result of racism, both in the society in general and within the left. However, it has the same characteristics there as anywhere else – that is, the elite within the black community uses nationalism as an ideology to unite the masses under its leadership and for its own gain. Like in the colonies, black nationalists end up emulating the European ruling classes. *Nationalism is not bottom-up and never can be.*

Bottom-up Equals Internationalist: We Are One People

Both those revolutionaries who saw class as primary over hue, and those who saw hue/nation as primary over class ended up as rulers of states. Neither movement, despite the dedication of its members and leaders, and their enormous sacrifices, led to ongoing liberation for the masses.

This indisputable fact is open to a variety of analyses. However, one question it clearly raises is whether revolutionaries who seize state power within a particular geographic area simultaneously become nationalist – and therefore capitalist. How do we create liberated areas and still continue the international struggle for liberation for all people?

Bottom-up organizing is not immune to the danger of tribalism/nationalism. Because everyone living today has grown up within a capitalist culture, there is a strong tendency for people to be loyal to whatever they identify as belonging to – their community, their “race,” their nation. By consistently going to the bottom and by building organization on a principle of strict egalitarianism, we can overcome this tendency. But we must be very conscious and vigilant, and always put forward unity with everyone on the bottom, whether they are in the neighborhood or village next door, or on the other side of the world. Bottom-up organizing IS egalitarian organizing; it is based on the knowledge that 80% or more of the world’s people are ONE people, and that our enemy is a common enemy.

* * * * *

Appendix to “Some thoughts on the unity of class and hue”

Introductory note: At the first international meeting of ISBO in October 2008, the document “Some thoughts on the unity of class and hue” was discussed. The collective accepted the document, and a few revisions and corrections were suggested. In particular, some comrades were concerned that the original document could be taken as an attack on Marx and Engels, whom we all regard as among the founders of our current movement. Hopefully this appendix clarifies where our thinking is right now on that issue.

Here are a few quotes from Marx:

“The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation.

Das Kapital, Chapter 31

Also from chapter 31 of Capital:

“[T]he veiled slavery of the wage-labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the new world as its pedestal.”

If you put these last quotes, from Marx, together with the quotes from Engels in the previous document, you see the essential contradiction they had. Even though they clearly recognized that capitalism was built on a foundation of slavery, theft and murder of Africans and indigenous people, which they abhorred and condemned, they did not quite recognize the equal humanity of darker people (“blackskins”), and they defined the international working class as the European/North American white workers.

[Note: Marx and Engels may also not have been able to foresee the permanent role of unpaid labor within the capitalist system of wage-labor. African slavery and the slave trade turned out not to be “primitive” aberrations of early pre-capitalist accumulation of wealth. Slave labor has always existed under capitalism and today there are more chattel slaves than at any time in history: 27,000,000, not including slave labor in prisons!]

Thus, when a large migration of left-wing Germans came to the US in the 1850s directly from Marx’s organization, they failed to consistently oppose slavery. Some did, but most saw the struggles of white workers as entirely separate from the issue of slavery, and many saw both slave and free black labor as in competition with white labor. (See *Black Reconstruction* by W.E.B. DuBois.)

To make it clear: white working people did not benefit from racism: quite the opposite. The institution of slavery pushed poor whites in the South off all the good land and out of most jobs except policing the slaves. They became more impoverished, from a strictly economic standpoint, even than many slaves, who were at least provided food, shelter, clothing and medical care at some minimal level. Both North and South, the ridiculously cheap labor of slaves pulled down the wages of all workers: in the South, who would hire a free tradesman if a slave could do the work? In the North, free black labor was willing to work for less than the going wages because any money was better than the unpaid labor they had just escaped from. If white workers, North and South, had grasped this simple point, they would have joined with the slaves to destroy slavery. But the massive campaign of racism waged by the plantation owners beginning in the 17th century had succeeded in convincing most whites that black people were subhuman and dangerous. (See Lerone Bennett’s book *The Shaping of Black America* for a well-documented description of this campaign.) Racism gripped the masses of white workers, North and South, so firmly that they were unable to act in their own self-interest. Thus Southern whites joined the Confederate Army en masse; Northern whites attacked black workers in the streets. Some whites joined the fighting in Kansas out of a commitment to freedom and equality, but many were fighting to keep black labor from competing with them.

We don’t want to be one-sided. There was a significant minority of whites who fought slavery and racism very hard. The abolitionist movement contained many principled anti-racists, some of whom died for their efforts. There were whites who actively supported nearly every slave rebellions, and who made up a large part of the Underground Railroad. John Brown’s raiding party, which had leadership and membership from both blacks and whites, was widely supported by black and white abolitionists, and had an egalitarian, and somewhat anti-sexist culture, could have changed history if they had succeeded in

their plan to set up a base camp in the mountains for slave guerilla warfare. Later, a subset of Southern whites joined former slaves, under black leadership, to set up collective living during Reconstruction. The fact that these anti-racist whites were active even in those benighted times gives us hope. However, they were a long way from representing the mass opinion of white people, just as is still unfortunately the case today.

We've discussed the history of racism in the US because it is what we know best. We know that many parallels exist in the rest of the Americas. Everywhere, slave owners and slave traders succeeded in preventing other poor and working people, indigenous, mestizo or white, from joining forces en masse with enslaved Africans. Everywhere, white ruling classes succeeded in recruiting other poor folks, against their own self-interest, to police and defend slavery. We personally want to travel more in the Americas to see this for ourselves (we've seen it in Jamaica, Mexico, Venezuela, Peru and Cuba), and we hope to recruit researchers to document it, including especially the history of palenques, quilombos, maroon and other intact black communities. Just as research on these topics has not been done adequately in the US, that's possibly even more the case in countries that don't perceive themselves as having a problem with racism (or even as having black people!).

But back to our story: what if German revolutionaries migrating to the US had brought with them a firm, anti-racist commitment? What if Marx and Engels had been able to educate them to the world significance of the Haitian Revolution and the historic role of black leadership in the struggle against capital? Of course we'll never know if they would have had the influence to overcome the well-entrenched racism among white workers, but the fact that they got it wrong allowed the working class of Europe and the US to be won to ally with the capitalists, uncontested.

We are not "blaming" Marx and Engels for their objective limitations. "What if" is only useful insofar as it helps us understand those limitations with the benefit of hindsight. As we have noted elsewhere, we still consider Marx and Engels our "elders," who gave us the tools to understand and change our world.

Using these tools, Marxists began to get it more right later on. In the 20th century, communists rejected the racist ideas that were reflected in the words we quoted from Engels (though without, to our knowledge, directly criticizing M&E), and promoted the idea that white workers should oppose racism. Some called for whites to support black struggles and a black nation, others called for a united working class, anti-racist movement. But none has yet effectively launched an anti-racist campaign among the masses of white workers. The result is that the culture that has been handed down from generation to generation among white workers is the culture that developed during slavery. This explains why poor whites in Louisiana took up arms to prevent black residents of New Orleans from escaping Katrina, why a black church in Massachusetts was burned down the night Obama was elected and hundreds of other hate crimes have ensued, why the Minutemen attract people, why the militia movement and Neo-Nazis are strong in places like Michigan and Montana, and why immigrants from Latin America feel a need to separate themselves from black people and demand to be part of the

“American Dream.”

Today, most people don't believe, as Europeans did in Marx and Engels' time, that black people are lower on the evolutionary tree. But, most people *do* regard black people as less intelligent, as possessing less wit, less knowledge and less genius because of objective conditions of oppression, denial of education, poverty, history of slavery, etc. Many are also afraid of them, especially black men, because of the persistent demonization of them dating back to early slavery. Because we, like Marx and Engels, are products of the prevailing (racist) culture of our times, anti-racist fighters also have this belief somewhere in our gut even if we don't consciously know it. When that is challenged, it is painful; people feel it in their heart, and get defensive.

This type of discussion about race and class was ongoing in the 1960s, especially in and around SNCC. The Black Power movement aborted it. Anti-racist whites in the discussion weren't able to see that Black Power wasn't inherently anti-white (directed against them) and felt rejected. Some black revolutionaries became nationalist and anti-white. A landslide of separation ensued, and white radicals were no longer under black leadership. They could (and did) decide, “I don't have to work with poor white folks just because they said so. I can work with anyone: black folk, Latinos, whales, or whatever.” Parties were either black-led and exclusively black, or white-led and overwhelmingly white (even the most multi-racial have yet to develop poor black leadership, 40 years later). The black parties were physically attacked and mostly destroyed by COINTELPRO (a US government counter-intelligence program). Black revolutionaries were murdered or exiled. Non-black parties began to drift away from active organizing and toward making ideological debate their primary focus. The movement became splintered and ineffectual: if this wasn't directed by the government, it may as well have been!

The revolutionary movement cannot go forward until the grave errors of the past are recognized, and a mass struggle is conducted against racism within the working class and its allies. For want of a better word, this is a “moral” struggle. In other words, it is not sufficient for white and Latino workers to see that their self interest lies in uniting with black workers; they also need to recognize in their hearts the ways in which capitalism has worked on them to make them fear and despise black people, to make them not recognize the humanity of black people, and make them not look to the leadership of black people, who have been fighting capitalism/racism since its inception.

As bottom-up organizers, we need to be principled and dedicated in the struggle for leadership from the bottom, who are the darkest-hued people. Let us remember:

The capacity to be just is greatest among those who have been treated most unjustly.

The capacity to distribute the world's resources equitably is greatest among those who have been most denied those resources.

The capacity to share and be inclusive is greatest among those who have been most

discriminated against, most left out, locked out and despised.

This is the capacity for genius that we are searching for. Formal education might make you better able to make money, and from the capitalist standpoint, yes, brown people are inferior and black people more so. But the lowest are the greatest geniuses on questions of humanity. The genius that is needed to save the world will not be found in the academy, nor among people who think ideas are primary and practice secondary: the genius that is needed to save the world will be found among those who have been most oppressed.

Victory at the Colombia-Venezuela Border! October 2008

Note: The first meeting of ISBO was held in Caracas, Venezuela. Two comrades from Colombia coming to attend the meeting were stopped at the Colombian border by the Venezuelan consulate, in a demonstration of power politics between pro- and anti- US/CIA forces in the Venezuelan government. This is the story of how a small but dedicated band of radicals got our comrades across the border and to the meeting.

The call came Monday from Bogotá: the Consulate is closed for a holiday, what should we do? The coordinator of the International School for Bottom-up Organizing (ISBO), who was already in Caracas setting up the week-long workshop, told the two young, rural organizers to come to the consulate at the border. Tuesday morning, the trouble started.

Although officials in Caracas had assured us the Colombian comrades should have no trouble coming into Venezuela on their British and Colombian passports, the Consul General in Cucuta had other ideas. The two were handed a list of all the requirements they would need to meet. By the end of the day, it was clear they were being denied their visas. Already on a shoestring budget and traveling cross-continent by bus, they were stranded in a truck stop with drug addicts and drunks.

Meanwhile, School participants from other countries were gathering in Caracas, and they went to work. ISBO organizers had been in Caracas several times over the past few years as organizers of the New Orleans Survivor Council, and had contacts within the government, but none of them would return phone calls. By Wednesday night, those contacts had been exhausted, a press release was being prepared, and the consulate was demanding an official letter of invitation from a government Ministry.

Thursday morning, the organizers went downtown to intervene personally with the government. The small band from the US, UK, Jamaica and Venezuela went to the Ministry of External Affairs and found a young, English speaking brother and sister on the sidewalk, who were immediately sympathetic. The young man, who worked in the Ministry, took the letter of invitation we had prepared and said he'd work on it after lunch.

We headed down the street to the General Assembly, where several hundred union protesters were gathered. We barged through them to get the attention of an official. We were trying to find the Assemblyman we knew from earlier trips (who hadn't returned our phone calls), but instead found a different Assemblyman who whisked us away to speak with an Army general. The general listened and promised to make some calls to the Consulate in Cucuta.

Back at the Ministry, where we walked through the pouring rain, the young man invited us in to help us correct our letter, get it scanned, and fax it to Cucuta. We called the stranded comrades, who received the letter by email and went to the Consulate the next morning, letter in hand.

The Consulate attempted more sabotage on Friday, saying they hadn't received the fax (which was sent three times) and telling the comrades to get various health and police paperwork. The general talked about sending some men to chastise the Consul General, who was clearly making up requirements not permitted by law. The young man at the Ministry stayed in close phone contact with us and did some things behind the scenes. Another government worker came on board at that point, in the Consular department, and also made phone calls. We let the Consulate know that we had contacted the Venezuelan and North American press.

One of our participants, who has military experience, suggested that he be allowed to go to the border and find out from the poor people there how to get the comrades across. We discussed it and agreed that if all else failed, he could go, but that the rest of us would go as well, as back-up.

Suddenly, the Consulate did an about face. An official came to our comrades, asked for their passports and photos, and went to stamp the visas in them – no other requirements! There was much jubilation on both sides, but the saga still wasn't over.

As they left Colombia, the Colombian immigration officials threw up a new obstacle, demanding the payment of a large fine for an alleged violation that hadn't happened. At that point, the comrades just walked across the bridge to the Venezuelan checkpoint and showed their visas, first the one that had been stamped by Colombia, then the other one. Before he saw the missing Colombian stamp, the official had stamped both visas. Then he ordered them to go back to the Colombian side and get the missing stamp. Once again, the two young comrades refused to buckle under. They simply went and got on a bus headed for Caracas.

That night, they endured six more checkpoints, with aggressive, armed National Guard, police and soldiers, but each time they made it through.

Saturday, two days late, ISBO started its official session. But the three days spent fighting the border authorities weren't lost. We learned lessons about the conflict between Colombia (supported and instigated by the US) and Venezuela, and within the Venezuelan government. We realized that the US in particular is afraid of what we are doing and pulled out the stops to prevent our front line comrades from reaching the meeting. And we all discovered the power of direct action, of being militant and not being intimidated by power, even in a "foreign" country, even against armed border guards. The struggle has cemented our unity, solidarity, and spirit. It has taught us the power and significance of building revolution from the bottom up and intensified our commitment to this work.

**Towards Building an Anti-Slavery Movement;
A Working Paper
September 2007**

Note: The following piece was written before ISBO, during the organizing effort of the People's Organizing Committee in New Orleans following Katrina. We include it here because of the important issues it raises, many of which were discussed at the founding meeting of ISBO. At that meeting, we agreed to carry out an action against slavery at an international gathering at least once per year. For other writing that documents the struggles leading to the formation of ISBO, please see our website at www.peoplesorganizing.org.

Genocide and the Necessity for Black Leadership

We are in the middle of genocide of black people, people of African descent. This is not the sort of genocide that we have been alert to in the past, where millions of people are decimated over a relatively short period of time in a small geographic and political region. No. This genocide is moving along at a steady, relentless pace, moving faster and faster with many focal points. But make no mistake: there is a “systematic program of action intended to destroy a whole racial or national group” (Webster’s New World Dictionary). Hundreds of millions of people of African descent are being killed before our eyes.

Everywhere on this planet the darker skinned people are the poorest, the least empowered politically and economically, the most reviled, the most feared. In the continents in which the disasters of slavery and colonialism were most intense for Africans, black people have been particularly devastated. Africa is now a continent in tragic ruin.

In the US, while the labor of enslaved Africans created the massive early wealth that allowed it to become the primary world power today, those black people who survived the massacres of the Middle Passage, slavery, and the post-reconstruction Jim Crow era went on to be permanently shoved to the bottom of the American barrel. The people who are descendents of Africans enslaved by the US have a huge prison population, the worst education and health care, systematic disenfranchisement from the vote, the highest unemployment, deep alienation from society, and constant harassment.

Former slaves have been fighting for their freedom against America from the beginning of the American slave trade to the present. Black workers have always been in a qualitatively different position in the struggle than have other workers, white or immigrant. This experience has made many black working people more acutely aware of capitalism’s evils and potentially the most revolutionary and least likely to compromise. Throughout history, black folks have led anti-government, anti-slavery and anti-capitalist struggles, including slave revolts, the Underground Railroad, Reconstruction, sharecropper and other union organizing, and revolts within the army in Vietnam, to name a few. The civil rights movement of the 1950’s and 60’s was not a fight of mostly middle class blacks; it was a fight of primarily poor black folks; and it was a fight for freedom that ignited a movement that was shut down early in its development, killed by US government intervention both overt and covert. Hundreds of violent urban rebellions erupted in the late 1960s, when it became clear to poor black people that the system

would elevate a few to middle class status and condemn the vast majority to fascist ghetto conditions and powerlessness.

Beginning during the earliest days of slavery, a deliberate effort was made to create conscious racism against people of African descent, an effort that has been reinforced with new and modern twists in each generation. This has made racism the main cause for weakness in the working class in particular, including both native-born white and immigrant workers: many white workers (and now also Latino workers) have been won to very racist, anti-black attitudes which prevent them from developing a true class conscious and egalitarian outlook, or a fighting spirit. **As long as racist attitudes prevail, there is no chance of creating an egalitarian movement and society.** Black people, especially poor, “ghetto” black folk, are the most oppressed, reviled, attacked, imprisoned, degraded and feared people in the country.

Because black poor and working people have the clearest vision about the enemy, the most revolutionary potential, and the least to lose, other working and oppressed people need to look to them for leadership in the common struggle, to unite with them, and to consciously and overtly oppose racism. When that happens, and only when it happens, the slave masters will truly be in dire straits and our people will finally have real hope.

The New Slaves and the Old Slaves: New Orleans

This is the context into which immigrants – the new slaves – step when they come across the US border. This is the context in which we must understand the current immigration reform movement, and in which we must place and plan our organizing efforts. To achieve justice, equality and unity, we must recognize that we are one people: that the movement against modern-day slavery of immigrants must come under the umbrella and leadership of the former slaves. There can be no separation.

Although a great deal of lip service is given in the progressive community to “black-brown unity,” it has proven exceedingly difficult to achieve on the ground. Let’s look at what this is, and then why.

Let us be clear: the writers of this working paper want to put these questions to all honest progressive people for discussion. We are not writing an abstract piece. This paper comes out of nearly two years of attempting to build the type of unity we want to see, in the context of the aftermath of the 2005 hurricane and flood in New Orleans. Two things became immediately clear when Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. One is that all levels of government abandoned poor and working black people in the face of the hurricane – they left black folks to die, and then removed them from the city, never to return. Our estimate is that this was a deliberate, planned use of the opportunity Katrina provided, and it led us to see that the US has become genocidal. The second thing that became clear was that there was already a plan in place to replace the black labor force in New Orleans with temporary, cheap and (hopefully) pliable “guest worker” immigrants: slave labor. Immigrants from Central and South America were in New Orleans within days, cleaning

up the toxic ruins in bare feet, without protective gear, health care, decent housing or any sort of rights.

With these facts evident to us, we began exposing the situation of immigrants immediately, within the process of organizing a movement for the right of return of black New Orleans residents, led by those most impacted: poor black people. We began organizing what was to become the New Orleans Survivor Council (NOSC). At the same time, we conducted a speaking tour to bring the travesty of New Orleans to the rest of the country and raise funds and support for that organizing, and in those speeches, we consistently pointed out the use of immigrant slaves and the need for organizers to work with them.

The organizing among black New Orleans residents got an immediate response from those few people who were able to remain or return early to the vicinity of the city. By January, the first meeting of the NOSC was held, with 300 in attendance. A support and organizing coalition (People's Hurricane Relief Fund, PHRF) led this work and controlled the money from the fundraising tour. By April of 2006, the NOSC felt itself ready to begin controlling the money raised in the name of poor black people and asked PHRF for oversight of the funds. PHRF responded by firing the staff that was organizing the NOSC. They took the money and ran. This was the first major internal attack on what we were by now calling "bottom-up organizing." We have briefly described these events because we feel they were echoed later in the work with immigrant organizers.

In response to the speaking tour, some immigrant organizers came forward and moved to New Orleans. Initially, they saw their work as separate from the work with poor black folk. We met intensively with them, however, and eventually developed an understanding that organizing of immigrant day laborers and guest workers would be seen as a part of organizing the oppressed New Orleans community fighting for the right of return. This meant that immigrant workers would be oriented to the situation they'd been brought into: that they were brought essentially as slaves, a cheaper source of labor for the clean-up and for the jobs that black workers held before they were evacuated from the city. Part of that orientation would be an understanding of the historic fight against past slavery and the ongoing fight against the current racism that created the very context in which they now found themselves in New Orleans. Flowing from this orientation was the need for the immigrants to become a part of the community under the leadership of that community itself, i.e. poor and working black people.

Upon entering any new political environment, newcomers take leadership from the most oppressed people already on the ground. Historically, enslaved Africans sought protection and support from, and formed alliances with indigenous Native Americans as they were learning the political landscape in America. In the case of the new immigrant workers in New Orleans, the necessity to create alliances with and take leadership from poor blacks on the ground was apparent to all.

The new immigrant organizers agreed to this broad understanding of the work and how it would be organized. We agreed that black and immigrant workers are fundamentally one

people, oppressed by the same masters. We agreed that the historic context required recognition of the need for black leadership. Although the organizing was separate, we projected that the immigrant organizing would come under the umbrella of the New Orleans Survivor Council, the safe space for growing bottom-up leadership to rebuild New Orleans by and for the people themselves. The plan was to bring black and immigrant together consistently to develop a fighting unity and also to form fast personal friendships.

A particular aspect of the relationship we wanted to develop was the historic role that the indigenous community in the US and Central America had played in harboring and protecting runaway African slaves (to the point that the Seminoles of the US and the Garifuna of Central America are black-skinned peoples today, and many Mexicans show African ancestry resulting from their ancestors' participation in the Southern route of the Underground Railroad). As a reflection of this, we suggested that the poor black community in New Orleans see itself in that same role in relationship to the new immigrant slaves: that of harboring and protecting them from their slave masters by providing places to stay and work if they wanted to run away.

To facilitate these goals, the immigrant organizers (Workers' Center) and NOSC organizers (People's Organizing Committee) began to meet together with a commitment to make all decisions collectively without outside influence, to evolve an entity that was made up of grassroots people who would then take charge of overseeing the work and the money, and to remain committed to black leadership of the overall work.

The Government's Plan for the Immigration Reform Movement

Our bottom-up plan for developing unity, however, flies in the face of the mainstream immigration reform movement, which is a broad spectrum ranging from the Democratic Party and government forces to progressive organizers. The "movement" is controlled from the top by the government and big business, who have an urgent need for immigration reform. To give a clearer understanding of this need, we've included below some quotes from an influential, 56 page analysis called **National Security and Immigration Policy: Reclaiming Terms, Measuring Success, and Setting Priorities**, by Donald Kerwin and Margaret D. Stock. This study was based on meetings between the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC) and government counter-terror experts "to explore how the U.S. immigration system should be reformed to further the nation's security." These quotes help us understand why the immigration movement has jumped off now, and in its present form. It also helps us see why an anti-slavery movement building unity of black and brown is such a threat to its current leadership.

"U.S. immigration policy can produce the foot soldiers needed for the U.S. fight against terrorism. Intelligence collection requires people with the appropriate language skills and cultural understanding. . . . The battle against terrorism also has a military component. Immigrants play a key role in military operations. Thousands of immigrants serve in all branches of the US military. **Without them, the U.S. military could not meet its recruiting goals**, [our emphasis] and it could not fill the need for foreign language translators, interpreters, and cultural experts. Immigrants add valuable diversity to the armed forces, and do extremely

well, often having significantly lower attrition rates than other recruits. The February 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review highlighted the key role that immigrants play in the Department of Defense and called for increased recruitment of native and heritage language speakers in all branches of the military.”

“The immigration system has not just failed to stem the flow of the undocumented. It has contributed to it. At a time when globalization has reduced barriers to the free flow of goods, services, and information, the United States has tightened its immigration policies related to the corresponding flow of immigrant labor. This anomaly explains the growing U.S. population of undocumented laborers and border crossers. Simply put, the U.S. immigration system does not offer sufficient legal avenues for needed workers and family members to enter the country. U.S. employment-based visas overwhelmingly go to highly skilled and professional workers. Not more than 10,000 visas per year are available to less skilled workers. The inadequacy of this number is evidenced by a multi-year backlog in this visa category and by the hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrants who find work each year in the United States. Nor do heavily over-subscribed, non-immigrant (temporary) visas for workers come close to meeting the demand for foreign-born labor.”

“The U.S. Immigration System Should Help to Integrate the Foreign-Born

The recent riots in France by first- and second-generation French citizens of African and Arab descent have been attributed, in part, to France’s failure to integrate its ethnic minorities. Over the course of roughly two weeks, the riots spread to 300 towns, led to 115 arrests, and resulted in the torching of 600 cars. These riots followed the July 7, 2005 subway and bus bombings in London by four British citizens of Pakistani origin; the November 2, 2004 murder of filmmaker Theo Van Gogh by a Dutch citizen of Moroccan descent; and the March 11, 2004 killing of 191 persons in Madrid by Moroccan and Algerian immigrants. These attacks have put the issue of integration on the European Union’s front burner; integration has been identified as an antidote to the radicalization of ethnic minorities and immigrant communities. Legal status, of course, represents a pre-condition to integration.”

“The U.S. Immigration Service Should Facilitate the Entry of Those Who Serve Our National Interest.

The U.S. immigration system must block the entry of dangerous persons, but it also furthers security when it facilitates the admission of persons who serve our national interests. As reflected in U.S. immigration laws, these include necessary skilled and less skilled workers. . . . [T]he United States depends heavily on foreign students and workers. Foreign workers represent 22 percent of U.S. scientists and engineers, 40 percent of engineering professors, and more than 50 percent of all PhDs in engineering, computer science, and the life sciences. Foreign skilled laborers, PhDs in science and engineering, and graduate students significantly increase U.S. scientific innovation, patenting, and research grants. Foreign students not only contribute financially to universities, but often remain in the United States to work. Yet U.S.

immigration policies limit the ability of the United States to attract talented foreign students and workers at a time when other nations have begun to court them actively.”

“The U.S. Immigration System Should Legalize the Flow of Essential Workers to the United States and Focus its Resources of High-Risk Immigrants

Undocumented workers constitute 5 percent of the U.S. workforce, and much higher rates of workers in many industries. For example, they represent 25 percent of meat and poultry workers, 22 percent of maids, 20 percent of construction workers and 18 percent of sewing machine operators. These industries would collapse without them. The U.S. economy—which is projected to create 21.3 million jobs between 2002 and 2012, with some of the fastest growth occurring in immigrant-dominated jobs—would stall without these workers.”

“The U.S. Immigration System Should Cultivate Immigrant Communities

Law enforcement depends on the cooperation of immigrant communities to provide them with intelligence on suspicious persons or terrorist plots. Many immigrant communities, in turn, have embraced opportunities to develop ties with the federal law enforcement. Immigrants will not cooperate with government officials, however, if they think such cooperation will result in their removal or some other punishment.”

“Recommendations

. . . Fifth, we recommend that Congress pass comprehensive immigration reform as a way to enhance U.S. security. Expanded avenues for the legal entry of immigrant laborers and family members will necessarily reduce illegal entries, and will allow the United States to concentrate its enforcement resources on those who might present a danger. A path to legal status for a significant percentage of undocumented persons will bring these people out of the shadows, and allow the United States to run identity and security checks on them. For the same reason, we support providing other incentives—like offering driver’s licenses—that would bring the undocumented to the government’s attention. By contrast, an “enforcement only” approach to reform will drive immigrants further away from law enforcement. We think that comprehensive immigration reform may be the most pressing immigration-related security need facing our nation.”

It is clear from these quotes that government and big business have a focused agenda and strategy for the immigration reform movement. As currently structured, the “movement” is their creation. So we see the phenomenon of hundreds of thousands of poor, brown-skinned modern-day slaves marching in the streets waving U.S. flags. The leadership has tried to frame it as a spontaneous uprising of immigrants with parallels to the Civil Rights Movement of black people in the 1960s. Many in the progressive movement have accepted this deception. However, any hint of unity between immigrants and the descendants of slaves threatens the very heart and core of US capitalism and their control

of this “movement.” In fact, they have gone out of their way to convince both black and immigrant that, far from being one people, their interests are in direct conflict. They have people like Ted Hayes, a black man and a spokesperson for the fascist Minutemen, telling poor black people that immigrants are the reason for their lack of jobs.

These people are consciously playing both sides of the fence. What we have been attempting in New Orleans is dangerous to them. Remember, we are operating today in a fascist, genocidal culture. The national immigration movement has made a conscious effort to tie immigrants to a patriotic, racist focus of assimilating into “middle class” white US culture. Immigrants are being hoodwinked into an approach that is opposite to their real needs and interests, while poor and working black folk are discarded and spurned. **Our beginning steps at developing an anti-slavery movement in New Orleans were breaking all established patterns.** It would be in the interests of capital and the government to infiltrate the progressive parts of the immigration movement with the intent to keep immigrants away from black folks and prevent their following black leadership.

Lessons from POC and the Workers’ Center

In the early days, many good steps were taken in the direction of developing black-immigrant unity in New Orleans: NOSC’s support of the H2B visa hotel workers; active visiting and soccer playing between the two groups; outreach to the Native American community for support for the immigrants; meeting and interaction between shipyard guest-workers and Baker residents; NOSC’s key involvement in the attempted citizens’ arrest of slave trafficker Matt Reid in Lake Charles (which resulted in dozens of immigrants getting their passports back); assistance from NOSC in bailing out day laborers; assistance from day laborers in rebuilding elderly NOSC member Mrs. Ora Green’s house; etc.

However, the plan for unity between both organizers and grassroots folks has often been carried out in a superficial way, and becoming less united with time. Immigrants have not been organized under the umbrella of the NOSC, but into an entirely separate organization, and are not conscious of the need for uniting with and taking leadership from poor and working class black people. Workers Center and POC organizers have not formed a truly united staff.

It has become clear that the Workers’ Center imagines that they can do some progressive organizing of immigrants without regard to black people and the long-standing movement against racism. To ally themselves with poor black workers, like the NOSC, is a difficult challenge, because it puts them outside of and in opposition to the definition of the movement as it now stands. It requires a commitment to egalitarianism, anti-racism and the “bottom” that would isolate them from the mainstream of the movement, and we now see that this has not been forthcoming. Instead, the work more and more reflects the general orientation of the mainstream immigration reform movement: separation of immigrants from blacks.

Our collective had a commitment to bring poor black and immigrant workers and their families into the same room to discuss and deal with these issues. The few times we have done so, we have seen that guest workers are never aware that they have been brought in to take jobs that would otherwise have belonged to black workers, and are often horrified when they find out. Similarly, black folks are shocked to discover that the immigrants who they've been told were "stealing" their jobs are actually slaves to the same masters that have attacked, dispersed and imprisoned them. Both groups are attracted to the idea that they are truly one community, one people. Instead of the two totally separate organizations and organizing drives that have developed, we should have been carrying out our original outlook of organizing the immigrants as a part of the NOSC community.

The fact of this separation at both the organizer and grassroots level is deeply troubling. In recent months we have witnessed a clear shift in the leadership of the Workers' Center away from its former united relationship with the POC. These changes have not been collectively discussed. How did our collective get fired and someone else take over the decision-making? It is obvious that we have now come full circle in New Orleans, and find ourselves in line with the rest of immigration reform organizing. We have ended up just where the government wants us to be: separated and vulnerable and within their control. And we were already struggling with a sea of vultures that had disassociated themselves from us a year ago because they did not want to share power with the community of sufferers.

We need a conversation about how to build an honest, integral, united, truly radical and revolutionary movement based on understanding the unique leadership role of poor working class black people in the US context. We need a conversation about how to do true bottom-up organizing with immigrants and separate that organizing from the mainstream, government-led plans for immigration reform. We need a strategic plan for defending the people on the bottom from the type of takeovers we have now seen twice in New Orleans, within black bottom-up organizing and within immigrant bottom-up organizing.

Our movement cannot pat itself on the back for supporting black-brown unity if we are not painstakingly building it on the ground, from the bottom. Our loyalty and responsibility are not to words and slogans, but to our people: poor and working black people, immigrant workers and their families, and all sufferers worldwide. We owe them much better than what this work has become. Change is overdue.