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**To Remake Our World:
Forging Black - Brown Unity in the Age of Immigrants
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[These remarks are adapted from a speech delivered at the Cinco de Mayo Banquet organized by the San Francisco chapter of the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA) on May 5, 2008]

The great Black poet, Langston Hughes - an active participant in the Harlem Renaissance and the Popular Front cultural politics prior to the suppression during the McCarthy Period - wrote a poem titled, "To You". One stanza goes like this:

All you who are dreamers too,
Help me to make
Our world anew.

I want us to think about these words. What is our dream? How do we want to make our world anew? If we could dream a world...not a utopian world which is unrealistic but an achievable world which is forged from the real world which we live in today...what would it look like?

For me, that achievable world would be one in which a baby's prospects as an adult would not be limited by his/her class, race or gender or nationality or sexuality at birth. It would be a world in which the ability of an adult or family to satisfy certain basic needs would not be dependent upon class, race, gender, nationality, or sexuality.

One way to describe this world is to call it a truly democratic world where the needs of

the majority of people to live decently take priority over the needs of a few to accumulate profit and power. During the 20th Century, there were two great social movements which took powerful strides to achieving this vision. One writer has called the period of the Thirties and Forties, the Age of the CIO because this period gave birth to the Congress of Industrial Organizations that new federation of unions based upon the historic battles of workers in the auto, steel, rubber, meatpacking, and port industries. During this period, these social movements anchored in the struggle of working people and stimulated a radical and egalitarian impulse throughout this country's politics and culture. As we know, this movement was imperfect because it contained a racial blind spot and the resulting successes of the period reinforced many racial hierarchies.

Moving forward to the late Fifties and Sixties, another writer has called this new period the Age of the Civil Rights Movement, as the upsurge in the Black community led to another democratizing moment. This moment expanded on the gains of the Age of the CIO by challenging policy and cultural limits, first on Blacks and later other racial minorities and women. The Age of the Civil Rights Movement also successfully challenged many elements of the US Empire and created the basis for the support of revolutionary efforts in many parts of the world. Reflecting upon these writers' thoughts about the Age of the CIO and the Age of the Civil Rights Movement, I wondered what would be the next great social movement that would push us forward toward a more democratic world.

Looking back at the mass mobilizations during the Springs of 2006 and 2007, I realized that we are in the Age of Immigrants and that the energy generated by newcomers from many parts of the Global South, as they struggle for a decent life and dignity, would be the energy that would spark successful challenges to the limitations of US society. However, social movements must always deal with the dead weight of the failures of past movements.

The Modern Civil Rights Movement of the Fifties and Sixties was an incomplete revolution and while explicit legal racial segregation was destroyed, new racial hierarchies emerged. Consequently, the just fight for immigrant rights in this country is occurring at the same time as the equally just fight to end the effects of white supremacy on Blacks in this country is continuing. In the context of today's corporate globalization and its impact on workplaces, communities, and power, these struggles are seen as competing and lead to complicated relationships between native-born Blacks and immigrant communities. Here in California (and in many other parts of the country), these new dynamics focus upon the ill-named "Black - Brown tensions". (Without trying to find a better label for these dynamics), I will call this talk:

"To Remake Our World: Forging Black - Brown Unity in the Age of Immigrants"

During the remainder of this talk tonight, I will offer my thoughts on how we can build greater unity between Black and Brown communities in order have a more powerful social movement to transform our world. I will focus on three areas: framing; political analysis; and organizing.

Framing

Since the 2004 elections, the idea of “framing” has occupied greater importance in the mind of progressives as we think about regaining the political offensive. While often the interest in framing or narratives takes on the appearance of a search for the right words or marketing phrases which will magically propel our side to victory, words are important. They convey political meaning and sometimes, the right words can unify. However, sometimes, words can divide and propel us down unproductive paths. I want to suggest three narratives that need to be re-examined if we are to build Black - Brown unity.

First: the immigrant upsurge represents the “new civil rights movement”

Often, immigrant rights advocates proclaim this as a way to convey to the mainstream that their cause is one that all Americans should support. While clearly the treatment of residents of this country is a legal question of civil rights, I think the use of the civil rights movements as a way to make the demands of immigrants more palatable misconstrues the true nature of social movements, misrepresents the key elements of the immigrant rights movement, and tends to push many Blacks away from supporting that movement.

Social movements are not a reflection of manifestos, resolutions, or press releases. They reflect the concerns, values, and aspirations of many thousands of people as they act in concert to achieve some goal. These collective actions are rooted in communities and thus each social movement has a core social base - that community whose energy drives the movement. - and hence, every social movement is unique. At its core, the social base of the civil rights movement was Black people. Centuries of white supremacy forged a culture, networks and institutions which sustained the Black community throughout the degradations of slavery and legal segregation and nurtured the political response to racial oppression. In contrast, the growth in the immigrant rights movement has been fueled by the experiences of its social base: new immigrants to the United States. Some may have risked death crossing the Mexican border; others took dangerous chances on small boats from Haiti; others may have arrived here from Nigeria on a student visa and chose to stay on past the expiration date of the visa; still others may have come to this country from China after years of waiting to be unified with family members already here. What unites these various stories is the loss of what was left behind and the struggle to adapt to a new country whose reality for many did not match the dreams of gold which lured them here. These stories are precious and they must be respected on their own terms without mediating lens of a movement which was not their movement. Beyond misrepresenting the immigrant experience, the notion of a “new civil rights movement” pushes away many (perhaps most) Blacks who feel that the civil rights movement of the Sixties was their glorious movement that defeated segregation and who feel that victory was incomplete and that there are still battles to be fought.

Second: “they are taking our jobs”

Many Blacks look around and see the presence of immigrants in jobs where Blacks used to be, see the high rates of joblessness in their community, and conclude that immigrants have taken jobs from Blacks. Clearly, unemployment is too high in the Black community; in addition, most levels of government are indifferent to this problem and currently, the Black community lacks the power to successfully challenge

this indifference. Finally, some substitution does seem to be occurring as jobs that had significant Black presence now have a significant immigrant presence. However, these realities should not lead anyone to think that "they" are taking anyone's job. Except in the too rare occasions when unions are powerful enough to control job access through a hiring hall, workers do not decide who gets hired and who does not. That is a power that management holds onto dearly and there are too many examples of management using this power to maintain a workforce that they like even if the process and the result are unfair.

There are examples of Blacks with a criminal justice record getting fewer employment opportunities than whites with a criminal justice record; there are examples of management hiring undocumented workers only to fire them when they attempt to stand up for their rights; there are examples of management firing workers regardless of race, gender, or nationality when these workers are seen as leaders of union organizing campaigns. Assigning immigrant workers the ability to decide who works and who doesn't is both inaccurate and lets management off the hook for any discriminatory treatment that they make.

Third: "Black versus immigrant"

Too often we hear about tensions between Blacks and immigrants. While we may use those words to avoid verbal awkwardness, it is important that the content of our actions reflect a more complicated reality. Not all Blacks are native-born and not all immigrants are non-Black. By reducing Blacks to only the native born, you are making invisible immigrants of African descent from Haiti, Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Africa. And ignoring the diversity within the Black population and turning us into "invisible men and women" is one of the hallmarks of racism in the United States. Our organizational activities must consistently reach out to include Black immigrants (and their issues and needs) as we build the immigrant rights movement.

Analysis

Better narratives will help us build the transformative social movement so we can perfect the democratic revolution. But what is also needed is having a political understanding of how anti-Black racism and modern corporate globalization work to organize our lives: creating the conditions for disunity between Black and Brown communities but also creating the conditions for unifying struggles to improve our lives. I would like to mention just three issues that need to be explored.

First: Anti-Black racism

Slavery (and the stealing of land from native people) is the original sin of the United States. One cannot tell an accurate story of the history of this country without telling the contribution of stolen/conquered land and slave labor to this country's growth. The story of the "westward expansion" and the mythic frontiersman collapses under the true light of day. The story of the Confederate flag and its representation of a "unique Southern (but non racist) culture" collapses under the light of day. By telling false stories, you push away much of the Black community because mythic America is largely not the American story that was passed down from slaves to sharecroppers to

new migrants to urban America to those that destroyed legal segregation. I mention anti-Black racism because too often progressives are quick to lump all types of racism together. Race is a social construction and its dynamic varies as the subjugated races vary. I am not trying to privilege fighting anti-Black racism over fighting other forms of racism. But tonight we are talking about building Black - Brown unity and so we must talk about what pushes many Blacks away.

Second: The impact of corporate globalization

Globalization is not a new phenomenon. The Transatlantic Slave Trade was an old version of globalization. And globalization is not inherently a bad thing. Too many of us in this room enjoy the benefits of our global interdependency. What is bad is the terms under which this current form of globalization operates. The terms are set by transnational corporations and they are designed to facilitate, first and foremost, the acquisition of profit. So let's call this globalization - corporate globalization - and begin to envision a globalization that would exist if we ran the world. Still, we need to talk about the effects of corporate globalization.

The political activist, writer and BlackCommentator.com Executive Editor, Bill Fletcher, recently told of the slogan used by immigrants to Great Britain: "We are here because you are there". This slogan captures the linkage between the migrations of people from the Global South to the Global North and the impacts of corporate globalization on the economies of the Global South. This linkage is largely unknown to working people in this country. The Labor Center runs a Black union leadership school and each year, we have a module on immigration. What is amazing is how little participants know about the Global South: what is happening to local economies and why people come to this country. (The worst example of this lack of information was relayed to me by a friend recently. My friend ran across another Black activist who quickly proclaimed that he had just met "another Mexican...and he was from El Salvador"!)

So we need to talk about the effects of corporate globalization so we understand how the movement of people to this country is linked to the power of global capital.

We need to understand how global capital is causing a new division of work around the world so that whereas before, the Global South was largely used for resource extraction and the Global North was the site of manufacturing, now more and more manufacturing is taking place in the Global South and the Global North is now home to more and more service industries. We need to understand how the weakening of our public sector - which hurts working class and poor people who depend on public services and hurts the Black community as we are disproportionately employed in government jobs - is linked to global capital. We need to understand that the transformation of our metropolitan areas with greater inequality across the regions, rising levels of gentrification, and rapid changes in old Black neighborhoods is because of corporate globalization. When these effects are understood, it will be easier to build Black - Brown unity to fight for the rights of immigrants.

Third: Immigration, the job crisis in the Black community, and the weakened state of the labor movement

Fundamentally, immigration does not weaken conditions for working people; it is the

presence of workers who cannot fight for their full rights as workers that weakens the conditions for working people. Instead of asking what would happen to the wages of native-born workers in the absence of immigration, we should be asking what would happen to the wages of all workers if all workers felt free to exert their right to organize. Too often, the issue of immigration is used by management to weaken labor standards for all workers. Most of us in this room know how the hotel owner in Emeryville hired undocumented workers for years and then called ICE after those same workers fought for the enforcement of the new living wage law in Emeryville. In our Black union leadership school, a shop steward told the story of an immigrant worker who was filing a grievance against his employer for violating the contract. In this case the company had assisted the worker in obtaining legal work papers. During the preliminary grievance hearing, management repeatedly reminded the worker of this assistance. In response to this not-so-subtle intimidation, the worker decided not to push the grievance. These examples (and others) illustrate that the division of workers into "legal" and "illegal" camps is just a device which employers manipulate in order to maintain their control over working conditions.

From the point of view of the Black community, this control over working conditions has resulted in a two-dimensional job crisis: the crisis of unemployment and the crisis of low-age work. Unemployment in the Black community is very high. And official unemployment statistics understate this reality because they fail to take into account the extraordinarily high numbers of Blacks who are in jails and prisons around the country. In addition, Blacks are disproportionately unemployed compared to whites in this country. Since the mid-Fifties, the ratio of the Black unemployment rate to the white unemployment rate has held steady at two-to-one. And this ratio has held steady during good economic times and bad economic times *and during period of low immigration and high immigration*. At the same time, large numbers of Black workers are toiling in low-wage jobs.

In 2000, 57% of all Black workers (full-time and part-time) received low-wages. In 2006, 32% of Blacks who worked full time for at least 50 weeks earned \$25,000 which was only 50 percent more than the federal poverty level for a family of one adult and two children. This same corporate control has resulted in a weakened state of the labor movement. US capital reacted to the crisis of the 1970s by becoming even more global and finding new ways to exert its dominance over U.S. workers. One part of this new strategy has been the increased attack on workers who attempt to organize. More and more workers have been fired for union activities and the current labor law (as it is written and as it has been enforced) does nothing to protect workers. Unions were slow to adapt to these new realities; in addition, many have not fully come to grips with the legacy of anti-Black and anti-immigrant sentiment within the white working class.

Organizing

Still, the best framing and political analysis will be useless in forging Black - Brown unity in the absence of effective organizing. The overarching task is to build a progressive majority to craft a globalization that serves the working people throughout the world. In the United States, this requires building organizations with power that are rooted in working class Black, Latino, and immigrant communities. The old adage - there are two kinds of power: organized people and organized money - is

still true.

Despite valiant attempts to harness the financial strength of dispossessed communities through asset building, financial literacy, and strategic leveraging of consumption and investment dollars, working class communities and communities of color will never have the financial capital to battle corporate elites on those terms. Our strength is organized people. It was the strength of organized workers that brought about the first big wave of unionization. It was the strength of organized Black communities that defeated legal segregation. It was the strength of organized immigrant communities that derailed conservative attempts to re-write immigration laws in 2006.

Moving from defensive battles to offensive battles will require activated communities so that policy advocacy takes place on more favorable terrain. In addition, building a progressive majority requires building strong unions that are deeply rooted in their membership and have the capacity to transform the working conditions of the membership. There is a creative tension between the need for democracy - so that unions reflect the aspirations of the membership - and centralism - so that unions can win battles on the current unfavorable landscape. Too often, debates over the future path for the labor movement gloss over this dialectical relationship and fall into an approach which strait-jackets the labor movement by viewing the choice as a mechanistic either/or dilemma. (The fact that the imperative to build a progressive majority requires a strong union movement is sometime lost on many activists who wonder if a successful social justice movement needs a strong labor movement. For all of its flaws, the labor movement is the segment of the social justice movement with the largest organized base and hence the most power of all other segments of the social justice movement. In addition, the workplace is one of the few places where working class people across all races, ethnicities, and gender come into contact and thus, the workplace is one of the few places where a set of common experiences can be the basis for real unity.)

Finally, a third task to bring about a progressive majority is building solidarity among working class communities of color. To achieve this solidarity, three things must be done:

- There must be an end to ethnic tribalism. Too often, the racialized allocation of power and resources in our society has resulted in the establishment of Black and Brown power brokers whose ability to deliver goods and services to their communities is dependent upon their connections with the white power elite. This situation causes these brokers to fight each other over crumbs which are available to communities of color and make it difficult to side with change with threatens to rearrange power relationships. In the mid-1980s, this meant that many established Harlem Black politicians refused to endorse the progressive mayoral challenge of a Puerto Rican candidate. In 1997, this meant that the very next day after the election of Lee Brown as the first Black mayor of Houston - before any actual policy actions - newspapers carried front page articles about the concern of Latino politicians that Latinos would be squeezed out of city contracts and services. In 2001, this meant that established Black leaders in Los Angeles chose to side with a moderate white candidate for mayor (largely due to the historic ties of the candidate's father to the Black community) over a

progressive Latino candidate. As long as these manifestations of ethnic tribal warfare exist, it will be difficult to unite Black and Brown communities.

- Second, there must be a concerted effort to challenge the anti-Black racism held by some immigrants. Often, Black activists attribute this racism to the global reach of US corporate media and the dissemination of negative images of Blacks around the world. What needs to be recognized is that regardless of the media effects, the history of racism means that there are indigenous sources of racial and color stratification in Latin America. During a session of one of the Labor Center's leadership development programs, there was a profound discussion among Latino participants about the color hierarchy within their communities.
- Third, there must be an equally concerted effort to challenge a United States-centered national chauvinism among Blacks in this country. One characteristic of United States culture is arrogance toward people and cultures outside of the U.S. While the racial stratification in this country means that Blacks interpret that national conceit through a different lens and with a different intensity, it is impossible for Blacks in this country to be completely immune from that arrogance. Statements among Blacks asking "why don't 'they' speak English" reflect such an attitude. A solid Black - Brown unity cannot be built unless such attitudes are changed.

In conclusion, I want to return to the question of what kind of world we seek to build and turn to the vision of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Slowly, King is being rehabilitated so that people understand that he was more than a narrow civil rights leader. He is being recognized for his courageous stand against the Vietnam War about which many moderate civil rights leaders warned him not to speak out on issues they thought were unrelated to civil rights. In the 1967 speech in which he publicly condemned US aggression in Vietnam, he made an equally powerful statement about the nature of social change he believed needed to be achieved. Many of us are aware of the biblical tale of the Good Samaritan who aided the poor he found along the dangerous road to Jericho. King spoke of the need to go beyond the traditional Good Samaritan role. He said: "A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring" Forging Black - Brown unity in the Age of Immigrants will help to bring about the restructuring of society that King understood was needed.

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