

Blacks and Immigrants: More Allies Than Adversaries

By Gerald Lenoir

The year 2006 will go down as a watershed year for the immigrant rights movement in the United States. Bringing millions of immigrants and their families and supporters into the streets was a huge accomplishment. But much more needs to be done to consolidate a fragmented movement and bring on new allies.

Last April, a group of African Americans and Black immigrants in Oakland, California came together to form the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI). “BAJI was founded to support the demands of the immigrant rights movement and to engage African Americans in a dialogue about the underlying issues of race and economic status that frame United States immigration policy,” says co-founder Rev. Phillip Lawson.

But why are African Americans taking up the cause of immigrants, many of whom are breaking United States law just by being in this country?

“We believe that African Americans, with our history of being economically exploited, marginalized, and discriminated against, have much in common with people of color who migrate to the United States—documented or undocumented,” Rev. Lawson explains.

There is a long history of blatant discrimination against the people attempting to migrate from Latin America, Africa, Haiti, China, and other regions, in favor of Western Europeans. Historically, as now, immigrants of color have been scapegoats for the economic ills of the United States and been subjected to exclusionary laws and racist violence.

BAJI’s goal is to organize a core group of African Americans prepared to oppose racism in all of its forms by actively building coalitions with immigrant communities and immigrant rights organizations, to further the mutual cause of economic and social justice for all. To succeed in the long run, activists must build a movement that incorporates all social justice movements, including immigrant rights and civil rights.

Formula for a Disaster

A public opinion poll conducted by the Pew Charitable Trusts in April 2006 found that a large majority of African Americans feel that immigrants are hard-working (79 percent) and have strong family values (77 percent). African Americans were more than twice as likely as Whites (43 percent vs. 20 percent) to support public benefits for undocumented immigrants. Two-thirds of Whites and 79 percent of African Americans said that the children of undocumented immigrants should be allowed to attend public schools.

Yet, more African Americans (22 percent) than Whites (14 percent) say that they, or a family member, have lost a job, or not been hired, because an employer hired an immigrant. In fact, 34 percent of African Americans, as compared to 25 percent of Whites, say that immigrants take jobs from United States citizens.

Despite the concerns of many African Americans, the high unemployment rate endemic to their communities is not the consequence of immigration. Rather, its root cause, like the root cause of current mass migration trends, lies with the worldwide phenomenon called globalization. Through its domestic and international policies on trade, lending, aid, and investment, and its military policies and actions, the United States government and its corporations are the main promoters (and beneficiaries) of an unjust economic system that is negatively impacting poor people, locally and globally.

Since the 1970s, globalization has meant the de-industrialization of the United States, with union jobs in manufacturing being moved to low-wage countries



in Latin America and Asia. More recently, it has meant the corporate outsourcing of jobs in the high tech and service industries. Add to that the historical employer biases against African Americans, the deterioration of the tax base due to White flight from inner cities, and the systematic public and private disinvestment in urban areas, and you have the formula for the devastation of Black communities across the United States.

The True Cost of Free Trade

A clear example of the bilateral and multilateral international policies of the United States that force migrants to risk their lives to come to the United States in search of a better life is the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Ratified in 1996, NAFTA forced Mexico to open up its markets to subsidized food crops from the United States. As a result, 2.8 million Mexican farmers could not compete with cheap United States commodities and lost their land and their livelihood (according to the *New York Times*). Many of those farmers and their dependents have migrated to the United States, looking for employment.

Consequently, African Americans and immigrants of color are pitted against each other for the proverbial crumbs on the table. This competition is a result of the normal operation of an unjust economic system.

The United States is now attempting to impose a Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) on countries in the region. Similar, so-called free trade agreements are also being proposed or implemented in many countries in Africa, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean.

The United States media loves to show images of a few African Americans protesting “illegal immigration” with rightwing groups, such as the Minutemen.

With classic, blame-the-victim logic, these misguided individuals have ironically cast their lot with modern day Ku Klux Klansmen.

So what are we to do? BAJI says that African Americans must join forces with immigrants to fight for economic and social justice for all.

A New Model for an Old Struggle

Unite Here Local 11 has set an important precedent for our struggle. In its latest settlement with the Beverly Hilton Hotel in Los Angeles, the 5,000-member, predominately Latino and immigrant union won a contract obliging the hotel to increase wages, maintain an employee health plan, and hire more African Americans. The victory is a model for negotiations with other Los Angeles hotels.

“The tensions between African Americans and immigrants will not be lessened until you increase the quantity and quality of jobs for African Americans,” says Steven Pitts, an economist at the University of California Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education. “It’s good that one industry is taking baby steps in that direction.”

Pitts maintains that African Americans would benefit if undocumented immigrants were granted legal status, citing recent studies, which show that legalization would improve wages and working conditions for both, immigrant and non-immigrant workers.

The African American struggle for civil and economic rights has never been waged without allies. Conversely, the struggle of immigrants for recognition of their human rights cannot be won without friends and supporters. If they join together, the two movements can take giant strides toward victories now and for future generations. ■

Photo: May Day march 2006.

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Gerald Lenoir is coordinator of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) and a long time anti-racist activist.

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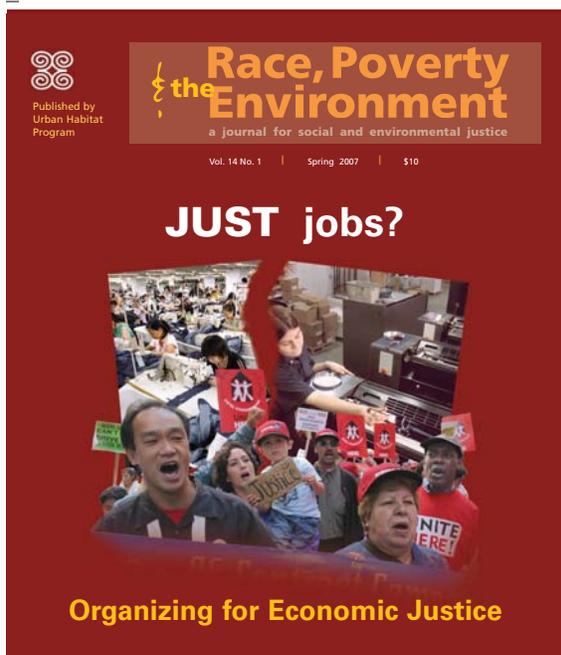
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