

Strengthening Black Organizing Across the United States

by DeAngelo Bester and Valery Jean*

The majority of people born this year in the United States were children of color. Some progressives believe that this ongoing demographic transformation will disrupt the structural racism that persists in our nation. Evidence suggests that this view is mistaken. We need only look to the minority-majority state of California to see that racialized structures persist and democratic processes remain unreformed. Others in the progressive movement suggest that setting aside the issue of race and focusing on distributive justice can lead to racial and economic equity. This view is also mistaken. Consider how durable racialized structures, such as school and housing segregation, limit the ability of people of color to graduate, enter the workforce, and remain outside a disparately impactful penal system.

Anti-Black racism has been and continues to be the glue that gives life to much of the resilience of structural racism. In addition to older forms, anti-Black racism has taken on the shape of symbolic colorblind racism that allows the fears and anxieties of Whites to be activated without ever using the “r” word. This new expression of racism is used not only to injure Blacks and other people of color, but also to destroy the consensus created by the New Deal and to undermine support for the middle class. By focusing on anti-Black racism, we are also asserting that in the imagination and production of structures, policies and programs, Blackness is foundational. Recognizing this can improve our understanding of American culture, structures and Whiteness, as well as our nation’s slow shift away from liberalism and public space.

Too many liberal and progressive groups are trying to develop justice without understanding racism and the anti-Black racism at its core. We believe this is a serious mistake. Race must be a central component of progressive work, both to disrupt structural racism and to achieve overall progressive change. We have seen this throughout our history, particularly in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Our goal in this article is to

suggest that strengthening grassroots Black organizing will ensure that race is central to the progressive movement, increasing a more precise analytic discourse and sharpening strategies aimed at achieving racial and economic justice.

It is important to clarify what we are not saying here. We are not asserting that Black organizing is the only means by which to transform our nation’s racialized structures; other non-White and interracial/ethnic organizing efforts are equally necessary. Nor are we privileging the Black experience above others. Instead, we are describing how racism and injustice work in America. While there are various forms of injustice, we claim that race is the central one. We also claim that our nation’s use of Blackness to distinguish between those in the “in-group” and those in the “out-group” is fundamental to our general understanding of structural racism. With our ever-increasing diversity, it is more appropriate to categorize our main racial divide today as White and non-White, while also attending to the distinction between Black and non-Black. Recognizing this sharpens our critical analysis of race and how it intersects with class. Supporting Black organizers is one powerful means by which to achieve racial and economic justice at the point of their intersection.

What We Mean by Black Organizing

We define “Black organizing” as the recruitment, consciousness-raising, skill-building and leadership development of Black people, conducted by Black people, in order to collectively challenge anti-Black

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racism and fight for civil, political, economic, gender, social and cultural rights. Critical to this mission is securing Black people in leadership positions within Black organizing groups. A number of these groups throughout the country have majority Black members or even boards, but their executive directors are non-Black. Max Rameau of Take Back the Land and Movement Catalyst notes that when organizations lack leaders with an understanding of Blackness they have an extremely difficult time engaging in Black organizing.¹ While organizations without Black leaders do good work, we believe that having a Black executive director with a deep grasp of anti-Black racism can greatly increase the effectiveness of their organizing efforts. But even an understanding of Blackness and Whiteness may not be sufficient. We believe to help disrupt the stereotype and bias that Blackness plays in our society it is imperative that Blacks represent again for both Blacks and non-Blacks.

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The Current State of Black Organizing

Unfortunately, a number of realities are seriously weakening Black organizing. First, Black communities and their leaders are fragmented. This lack of unity has made it more difficult to organize. Following the civil rights movement, some Blacks became economically mobile due in large part to union and public sector jobs, but many others remained cut off from opportunities. As a result of this growing class divergence it has become difficult, if not impossible, to organize around a unified vision for social justice. Before the gains of the civil rights movement, segregation meant that middle-class Blacks belonged to the same institutions and organizations that made demands on a system that shut everyone out. Since that is no longer the case, the urgent imperative for grassroots Black organizing today is building power among the people and producing more effective outcomes in the communities left behind.


Black organizing is also weakened by the lack of institutions willing or capable of engaging it. Traditional

civil rights organizations like the Urban League, and to a lesser extent, the NAACP, do not prioritize grassroots Black organizing and are often cut off from a grassroots Black political base. Instead, those venerable institutions limit their engagement to top-down advocacy and litigation activism; but organizing, or even supporting grassroots formations, is not at all part of their work and to expect otherwise is to wait in vain for leadership or expertise that will not emerge.

On the flip side, many national organizations and networks committed to grassroots organizing have lacked both a comprehensive analysis on structural racism and the role that anti-Black racism plays in holding the system together. Groups like the PICO National Network, National People's Action, Gamaliel Foundation and others play a critical role and are evolving their racial justice analyses, but have been more rooted in a populist, economic justice analysis.

Other Black-led organizations operating in Black communities focus on direct services or economic development. Although all of these approaches remain vital and actually connect organizations to those most affected by structural racism, they do not usually engage those constituencies toward action. Though important exceptions to this overall reality exist, most service-oriented organizations in the Black community do not prioritize developing leadership or base building in order to make demands on targets. With grassroots involvement, a movement can be developed beyond single campaigns, increasing the ability of all strategies to bring about structural and systemic change. Applying both top-down and bottom-up strategies can create “communities of opportunity” and lead to campaigns for good jobs, affordable housing and relevant, quality schools.

Unfortunately, Black organizing also suffers from a lack of resources. In his report “The Black Door of Social Change,”² Dushaw Hockett summarized over 100 interviews with Black organizers and directors across the country finding that many of their organizations were small and underfunded. These “mom-and-pop shops” usually have deep roots within the Black community and work on issues critical to its survival, but they possess very limited operating capacity with little to no paid staff to facilitate the daily work necessary to advance long-term social change. This lack of capacity



also prevents many of these organizations from being part of larger alliances and coalitions, which are often on the frontlines of efforts to win living wage jobs, affordable housing, expanded health care, environmental justice and police accountability. The presence of strong, grassroots Black-led organizations in such formations would increase the ability of the larger progressive movement to push big issues and bring home actual change to engaged constituencies.

Dismantling Structural Racism Through Strengthening Black Organizing

In their book “The Miner’s Canary,” Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres use the metaphor of “the canary in the coal mine” to illustrate the role communities of color play in our society. Harms experienced by communities of color serve as a warning sign of problems within the larger environment. The Black community has been our country’s perfect canary. For example, years before the subprime lending crisis started getting mainstream media attention, Black communities across the country were being devastated by its effects. Strengthening grassroots Black organizing can draw critical attention to the realities facing the Black community that also harm other communities. As in movements past, organizing highlights many critical issues in the Black community and allows other communities to view those issues for what they are: warning signs of what’s to come in the broader economy and society. The caution of the miner’s canary is also a reminder that by neglecting opportunities to expand Black organizing capacity, we fail to develop the larger movement for racial justice.

At its very core, Black organizing is about challenging racism and racialization, which by necessity requires challenging Whiteness and its values and privileges expressed in our cultures and institutions. Black organizing is uniquely able to take what appear to be isolated events about individual people – the Jena 6, the Scott Sisters, Troy Davis and Trayvon Martin – and through organizing around those events, build a base of supporters broader than the Black community to fight for larger systemic change. “Black organizing directly confronts racism, especially anti-Black racism,” according to labor policy specialist Steven Pitts of the Berkeley Labor Center. “This allows organizations to recruit Black folks from widely different income levels because of the unifying factor of race and shared

oppression.”³ This characteristic of Black organizing is vital to dismantling structural racism.

On many issues, the Black community expresses more progressive politics than other American communities. For example, Blacks overwhelmingly support policies that would redistribute wealth and help bring about a more equitable and just society. A 2011 National Journal found that 84 percent of Blacks support the idea of a surtax on people making more than \$1 million a year, as compared to just 77 percent of non-Whites (including Hispanics) and 68 percent of the overall population.⁴ As the struggles from the civil rights movement fade from our collective memory, our country can greatly benefit from Black organizing that will contribute to a new racial justice movement through consistently strong progressive politics.

Solutions and Recommendations

While progressive organizing groups representing any community could use help in building capacity, we would argue this is especially true for Black organizations, in light of their particular role and the challenges noted above. Below are some recommendations that foundations and other funders could consider in their role to strengthen Black organizing:

Create a significant donor collaborative fund to improve the infrastructure and capacity of Black organizing, including the recruitment and training of Black leaders and executive directors. The fund should focus on Black organizations with varying degrees of capacity, and on broad-based support as opposed to any one particular issue or geographic setting. Thomasina Williams, a former program officer at the Ford Foundation, estimated that a fund up to \$50 million would be needed in order to have real impact.⁵

Strengthen relationships and networks. Funding can support exchanges, convenings and leadership training among both the staff and base of Black organizations, and also assist in helping these organizations and organizers develop alliances with other organizers of color.

Open doors. Funders can empower Black organizers by linking them to influential contacts, particularly when limited access to existing nonprofit sector infrastructure is a barrier for many startup efforts.

Become an ally and a partner, as well as a funder.

In addition to critical financial support, funders can publicly stand behind Black organizers on controversial issues and leverage their social and political power to increase organizers' effectiveness.

Invest in internal political education and training around structural racism and implicit bias. In addition to understanding racialized structures, progressive funders can take note of implicit biases – their own and others – that can compromise an understanding of the Black experience and what is needed to ameliorate it.

Our nation is at a crossroads. But through dedicated organizing, leadership and alliance building – which bring racial equity into the heart of movement work – we can see the potential for building a future where racial injustices are greatly curtailed. This future sees a new majority of communities of color where differences are acknowledged and appreciated. Unfortunately, we also can see a future in which marginalization of communities affected by structural racism is intensified – where self-determination is denied for large numbers of Black and Brown people because of massive unemployment, lack of access to capital, mass incarceration, immigration policies that foster and exploit large undocumented populations, and the restriction of voting rights.

To advance our collective goal of ending structural racism, there must be serious alignment and coordination between organizations in the field of racial justice like never before. This means that each community must have space to develop its own leadership and its own analysis, so that diverse leaders can come together as peers to struggle with a larger racial and economic equity agenda.

We hope these reflections and recommendations open up dialogue that begins with a candid assessment about the present state of Black organizing, and from there builds upon the need for a stronger, Black-led and race-conscious field of organizing and action with its transformative potential to move the country toward more progressive values and energize a comprehensive agenda for racial justice.

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* Thanks to John A. Powell, director of Haas Diversity Research Center at the University of California, for his contributions to this article.

¹ Interview with DeAngelo Bester, August 2011.

² Hockett, Dushaw. "Black Door of Social Change." *Black America Organizing Project*. Black America Organizing Project, n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://blackorganizing.org/resources/the-black-door-of-social-change/3/>>

³ Interview with DeAngelo Bester, March 2012.

⁴ Cooper, Matthew. "Occupy D.C. 2 Most Back Protests, Surtax." *National Journal Daily*. National Journal, 19 Oct. 2011. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.nationaljournal.com/daily/occupy-d-c-most-back-protests-surtax-20111018>>

⁵ Phone interview with DeAngelo Bester, October 2011.