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 deindustrialization 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
bias 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 devast-
ation 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 liveli-
hood (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 immigra-
tion” 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 condi-
tions 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.

Gerald Lenoir is coordinator of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) and a long time anti-racist activist.
First published as a joint project of the Urban Habitat Program and the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, RP&E is now published twice annually by Urban Habitat and is dedicated to exploring the intersection of race, class, and environmental and social justice.

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