

# The Responsibilities of Anti-Racist Whites

by Ted Glick

*(Below is a slightly enlarged and edited version of a presentation given by Ted Glick at a conference on racism organized by the North Star Fund, February 28th, 1993, in New York City.)*

I would like to focus in this presentation on two areas. The first is what I would call the *basics* of our responsibilities as white, or European-American activists. To my way of thinking there are three basics which we need to follow if we are serious about our responsibilities.

First is that we need to be able to develop friendships and social relationships with people of color. We need to be able to relate to people from different cultures on more than just a "meeting" basis. We need this in order to break down the guilt, the fear, the insecurity that we can easily feel given the racist history and the segregated social realities in the United States. If we are *not* able to develop healthy friendships, we are going to have serious problems dealing with racism. This, I think, is fundamental.

Second is the need for serious study about the history of racism in all its different manifestations; i.e., what happened to the indigenous peoples in the Americas beginning over 500 years ago when Columbus and his crew arrived; the brutal theft of tens of millions of people from Africa, the development of slavery, Jim Crow segregation in the South, and institutionalized racism growing out of that set of historic realities; the history of the Asian and Pacific Island peoples in the building of the railroads, the sweatshops, etc.; and the history of the various Latino/Latina communities as they were affected by the arrogant "manifest destiny" of successive U.S. governments. We need to understand this history of racism so that we can understand how it has affected the realities of our society today.

The third "basic" is that we need to be involved with organizations that are either multi-



*Ted Glick speaking at 1986 Brooklyn, N.Y. rally for housing and jobs.*

racial or are consciously anti-racist. These two things *should* go together, but often they don't.

When I say an "organization" I mean a union, a tenant organization, a church, a political group, whatever it might be. There is a necessity for those of us who are "white" to have that kind of involvement, so that we have a "reality check." Those of us who do not experience racism in the way that people of color do on a day to day basis need to be constantly reminded, brought up, criticized, confronted and/or exposed to these realities of racism as often as possible.

Unless these "basics" are present in the lives of those of us who are Euro-American, we are in constant danger of being adversely affected by the subtle and not-so-subtle racism that permeates and pervades the dominant economic, political, social and cultural institutions of this society. Good intentions are not enough; **concrete steps in the way we live our lives must be taken if we are to fulfill our human, anti-racist responsibilities.**

## Learning to Recognize Racism

The other major area I'd like to address is learning how to recognize racism. When I use the term in this presentation, I am speaking about not just institutionalized racism, such as you find within the criminal justice system, the mass media, or the corporate structure, etc., but in groups such as a community group, a church, a union, a constituency-based organization, a family, a group of people hanging out on the street, etc. In other words, I'm talking about the day-to-day forms of racism and how to recognize it.

In a multi-racial setting white people often do not listen when people of color make contributions in the course of a discussion. It happens

a great deal within organizations that are predominantly white. It's as if the people of color weren't there. They are there to "integrate" the group, but not to be listened to seriously or taken seriously. It's a very real problem, and we need to learn to recognize it and respond to it when it happens. We can say, for example, "we are not listening to our sisters and brothers who have important things to say and contribute." We need to do that; that's our responsibility.

The second thing we must recognize is when there are double-standard critical and negative comments made in response to contributions from people of color. I remember a meeting in which an African American woman from the South had made some excellent comments. A white man who spoke after her then made a picky comment on how she had mis-pronounced a certain word. She became very upset, justifiably. It was as if the white man was looking for anything to put her down.

Usually this is an unconscious process on the part of white people. But because of the reality of racism, and the mindset those of us who are white get as it diffuses throughout the dominant culture, it's something we need to guard against, look at, and look for.

Another example is our unwillingness to respond to leadership from people of color. Initiative and leadership that is given just is not accepted. White people often feel as if it is only themselves who have to come up with the ideas or give the leadership to carry things through, that only *we* have the necessary skills, connections, expertise, etc.

If we do have the skills and connections, isn't it likely that the racism in our society has something to do with it? And even if we do, is this in and of itself enough to justify "us" being the leaders? In many cases people of color *do* have skills and connections *and* they have a way of giving leadership which may well be more effective. It is an historic fact that when African Americans and other people of color move, politically, this oppressive system is the most shaken up and forced to take progressive action in response.

Another example of the ways in which white people can express the racism that has been ingrained into us, is in a meeting where several people of color are raising similar criticisms. This is a tip-off that there's something wrong. This

dynamic is unhealthy not only for the people of color who raise these criticisms, but also for the whites who do not see the problem. Those of us who say we're anti-racist need to recognize when the discussion is excluding people or making groups of people angry.

### **Paternalism, A Different Form of Racism**

Finally, I want to try coming at this from a different angle. There's a form of racism that's called "paternalism" which is different than the others mentioned.

Webster's Dictionary defines paternalism as "a system under which an authority treats those under its control in a fatherly way esp. in regulating their conduct and supplying their needs."

To paraphrase: "a white person treats those who have been victimized by racism in a condescending, possibly "nice" and "concerned," but ultimately unequal way, thereby continuing the same relationships of inequality which were the original problem."

What we are working at and working for are relationships of equality. However, when there's been a long history of racism, I do believe that there needs to be a little "bending of the stick". It's not as if, after the long history of racism in this country, we're just going to be equal or able to interact with each other in the ways that we should. Ultimately, though, we "whites" need to be able to interact with people of color in a way which is straight-up and direct, totally honest and up-front. For example, when a person of color says things in a meeting that would lead the group in a wrong direction, we need to speak up and respond to this, not act as if everything that people of color say are automatically to be followed.

We need to go through the process of learning to be honest with each other, to respect each other, to disagree with each other, to listen to each other, and to interact in ways that are not paternalistic. We need to have equal relationships, mutually support each other, constructively criticize and genuinely self-criticize. This is one of our hardest tasks due to the long history of racism and my belief that there needs to be some "stick-bending" which acknowledges this history. It's a very real struggle and challenge, one we need to work at constantly, but we will only be stronger as a result of this struggle.