

## LINKING OUR STRUGGLES: STRENGTHENING SOLIDARITY WORK WITH ROOTS IN ANTI-RACISM

Committee: Bay Area CISPES

Author: Alicia Grogan Brown

Category: Discussion Paper

*Melanie and I began developing this paper together. Appropriately named, this discussion paper comes out of ongoing dialogue we have with many people whose work and dedication we value and learn from every day. The basis of it comes out of the long term process of building the Bay Area CISPES chapter, and the voices that this paper attempts to portray are the voices of people who dedicate much of their lives to local/global solidarity, prison activism, queer and trans liberation, anti-rape/assault work, and all around anti-racist, anti-war and anti-imperialist organizing. It is a discussion paper because it intends to inspire dialogue as a catalyst for grappling with issues that are fundamental to the revolutionary work that we aspire to do. I hope the questions this paper raises spark enthusiasm for continued dialogue.*

~ Alicia Grogan-Brown

Growing up in a white middle class family in Maryland/DC, I was taught that I could change the world. And I actually grew up believing it! The racist message of capitalism told this white girl that as long as she worked hard enough and multi-tasked enough, she could do and be anything. But I'm learning that if we try to take on too much we drown in our own eagerness and exhaustion. We are organizers, fighters, activists, revolutionaries, visionaries, in a time that demands us to work together if we are to continue forward with the momentum we are building this time around. We are not just fighting the corporate world – we are working to create the society in which we want to live.

The U.S. Latin America solidarity movement has decades of experience under its belt. We have been pivotal in the exposure of human rights violations by U.S.-backed military regimes in countries like El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala. Solidarity organizations, like CISPES, have facilitated thousands of U.S. activists going to

Central America on delegations to witness the repression first-hand. We have sent possibly millions of dollars in direct material aid and supplies to support revolutionary social movements in Latin America. We have marched in the streets, participated in non-violent civil disobedience, and done direct actions calling attention to U.S. intervention in Latin America. The horrifying realities of what U.S. tax dollars were/are doing in Latin America was, and still is, a catalyst for thousands of people in the U.S. to mobilize for social justice. This movement continues to help organize and train many of the activists who are playing lead roles in today's movements.

Another major success of the Latin America solidarity movement is that it popularized, within the U.S., a solidarity model of organizing that is based on self-determination: following leadership directly from those who are most affected by U.S. intervention. "The Central American solidarity movements had a quality that was lacking during Vietnam-and in some respects is also lacking in the current conflict: A direct connection to the people in the conflict zone" (A). As working people (and many of us as queer folks, women, people of color) we recognize cross border solidarity as a necessity in confronting U.S. imperialism.

Movements are on the rise. The world is in a crucial time – if we are going to build a successful movement we need to make alliances! "Where are the people of color?" We've heard this question more and more throughout the anti-corporate globalization movement, and now the anti-war movement as well. Instead of asking: "Why aren't people of color mobilizing their communities to the events we organize or to join *our* groups", we should be asking: "How are people of color organizing in their own communities? How can we work in alliance and solidarity

with them? What can we learn from them?" I've heard more people of color speaking out and reminding the anti-war and anti-corporate globalization movements that community organizing is not a new thing for communities of color – it is a way of survival.

The Latin America solidarity movement of the '80s was built on the white liberal base that was left over after the dispersal (by incarceration or death) of many radical organizations led by people of color in the '60s and '70s that were crushed by the state. Many of those leaders went on to become prison organizers. By the '80s, with the main leadership of color pushed behind bars, underground, or out of existence, the base that the Latin America solidarity movement had to build on was mostly white. The very close ties that white activists had to the FMLN and the FSLN was, and still is, the root of the strength that the solidarity movement carries. The ongoing need for emergency reaction to immediate crises caused by war in Central America did not allow for resources to be spent on organizing with oppressed communities in the U.S. – especially with much of the leadership under the stronghold of the state.

Resistance led by people of color is on the rise in the U.S. again. The Zapatista uprising in '94 brought forward a new and improved model of solidarity – "Zapatismo" – based on a "concept of communal/popular power" and the "potential for autonomy" that all workers carry (E). The most powerful message being: **we have the capacity to build revolution wherever we are.** This is how we can build and connect movements in the current age of globalization.

Next year's presidential elections represent the closest chance ever for the FMLN to really catapult the long term revolutionary project of change and development rooted in social justice. We too must be thinking of the long term in all of our work. How do we ensure that the revolutionary movements, not only in El Salvador, but *also* the revolutionary movement in the U.S., do not get squashed by the ruling right wing? How do we ensure the success of cross border people's victories?

### Supporting the self-determination of oppressed people in our U.S. organizing

If we are going to talk about following leadership, we can't just follow leadership from El Salvador and then talk about incorporating and consolidating people into "our" cause here in the U.S. In order to build CISPES as an accountable and sustainable organization, we need to relate the solidarity work with El Salvador to the solidarity work with the people in the U.S. If we are really working in a solidarity model, and working as allies and compas to those most affected by this system, then we also need to

live out solidarity with the people in oppressed communities, especially people of color, in the U.S.

In order to find footing in the movements of today, I began looking to the past for clues to our organizing history. CISPES is well-known for its dedication to challenging oppressive behavior within the solidarity movement. Many of the people taking on leadership in CISPES today are women and queer folks, which is a direct result of CISPES's ongoing commitment to dismantling oppression. This has added an essential dimension to our work – linking systems of oppression and working together to dismantle them.

As a predominantly white organization, however, we as CISPES organizers have more work to do around challenging racism in U.S. social movements, and even within CISPES itself. "One admitted failing of CISPES was that it dealt with relations with African-Americans as an afterthought, something that has had repercussions" (A). How did it happen that CISPES, an organization historically renowned for confronting systems of oppression within the movement itself, has leaped so many hurdles around gender and sexuality, but has failed to come through as strongly on the issue of racism?

\*\* Before going further I want to clarify: being a predominantly white organization is not a *problem*. It is *crucial* that white people actively participate in the struggle because we will not be free from the systems of capitalism and white supremacy until all people are free! We don't need to scramble towards racial diversity in order to challenge the oppressive system of white supremacy. "Multi-racial" does not mean anti-racist: take the Bush administration and the U.S. Military as two clear examples! We can fight the system of white supremacy by recognizing that it is another facet of institutionalized power, and very much connected to the class struggle. \*\*

### Racism: a U.S. problem?

"Race" manifests itself differently in the U.S. and in Latin America. Something I quickly caught onto the first time I spent time outside the U.S. (Guadalajara, Mexico in 1998) was that in Mexico (and across Latin America as I found later) racism is seen as a U.S. problem. Class consciousness is better developed across Latin America, and we follow that example in working to build stronger class consciousness in the U.S. as well. A friend of mine from Colombia reminded me that Latin America also inherited racist language and racist ideologies from European colonizers, but people don't name it as racism. When I ask people in Latin America what divides us, the answer is almost always class. Institutionalized racism in Latin America is most apparent in the exploitation and/or isolation of indigenous and African communities, but even that is rarely addressed as racism.

When I ask in the U.S. what divides us, racism is the answer people give most often. If we are organizing here, we need to be able to talk about racism. Confronting racism adds to the class analysis: we cannot separate class from race, especially in the U.S., because institutionalized racism is one of the strongest pillars used to build, and justify, this capitalist system. As Howard Zinn explains in *The People's History of the United States*, colonization in the U.S. brought "the most cruel form of slavery in history" due to "the frenzy for limitless profit that comes from capitalist agriculture" along with "the reduction of the slave to less than human status by the use of racial hatred" (D).

The majority of people in Latin America are mestizos – usually portrayed as mixed Spanish and indigenous descent, although mestizos are more complexly comprised of also African, European and some Asian ancestry. In Latin America, along with colonization came a complicated system of many different classifications for percentages of mixed ancestry. In contrast, in the U.S. "race" followed the one-drop rule, where if a person was found to have a small percentage of non-European ancestry they were not considered "pure" – or "white" – and therefore less than human and very exploitable.

A quick deconstruction of the concept of *white*: "*Whiteness* was born as a racist concept to prevent lower-class whites from joining people of color, especially Blacks, against their class enemies. The concept of *whiteness* became a source of unity and strength for the vastly outnumbered EuroAmericans – as in South Africa, another settler nation. Today, unity across color lines remains the biggest threat in the eyes of a white ruling class" (B).

#### Anti-racism: a foundation for U.S. organizing

Historically the organizing base of CISPES has been mainly white. There has been discussion lately around working towards a transformation of the organization to becoming more multi-racial. But we can't see that process as a quick fix to our "problem" of being a predominantly white organization. **The only accountable way for us to transform CISPES into a multi-racial organization is to make anti-racism a foundation of our organizing in the U.S.** It is a way we can carry our work closer to reaching its potential. Fighting white supremacy is in our interest: creating a more just, equal world is in everybody's interest.

As a predominantly white organization organizing in the U.S., we have two primary responsibilities around racism. One is to confront the destructive power of institutionalized racism that this capitalist empire was built on. If we are not challenging the very foundations of this corporate-controlled, white supremacist, patriarchal, heterosexual system of capitalist oligarchy, then we are too close to unknowingly using our white privilege not to

break this system down, but to actually uphold it: People of color always have to confront racism, on an organizing level but even more so as a means of survival. White people get to choose when to deal with racism. We don't have to confront it daily in order to survive. Actually, we survive more comfortably and easily when we don't confront racism.

Another responsibility we have is to challenge ourselves, call each other out and support each other in confronting our own individual participation in systems of oppression (white supremacy in this example but also in terms of other systems of oppression). As organizers in the U.S., speaking and taking action from an anti-racist approach against the institutionalized racism that upholds the capitalist system is what will attract people of color to work with us – and what the ruling class fears most! Even if we have an anti-racist statement, if we can't have complex and accountable discussions about racism, if our approach to organizing is not actively anti-racist, we will continue to drive people of color away, as I have already seen happen in my short time working with CISPES. One step in this is acknowledging and exploring our own internalized superiority. "If white people are to work for an end to racial injustice then we must come to understand how the psychological wages of whiteness have (mis)shaped our identity and (de)formed our consciousness. Until white people confront their internalized superiority, the dynamics of racism will be reproduced unconsciously" (C). And damn, sometimes it's hard to hold myself accountable to that.

I have been organizing with an anti-racist analysis (sometimes more actively than other times, I admit) since I plopped myself down into the semi-deep south at a liberal arts college in racially divided Greensboro, North Carolina in 1997. African American students at other colleges in downtown Greensboro, along with other African American citizens, call Guilford College the plantation, because although the college prides itself on having a fairly diverse student body for being such a small school (1200 students), most workers on the service staff (janitors, cooks & servers) are African American.

Over 5 years later, I continue to struggle with confronting my own racism. Even recognizing it can be the hardest thing. As soon as I find myself saying things like, "oh, I don't need to think more about how being white affects the organizing I do. I've already dealt with that issue..." that's when I need it most. Because it never goes away. There is always more growing and changing to do. And there is never a comfortable way to confront racism. It always has been and always will be a contentious issue, because the emotions and reactions we have around racism are rooted in the ruling class's need to divide and conquer us.

## Talk the Talk, Walk the Walk: How do we further transform our anti-racist language into action?

There is a way for us to engage more anti-racist, community based organizing, and not take away from our focus on El Salvador. It is a difficult task to take on, but it is indispensable to our work. I'm learning that the beauty of a strong social movement is that everyone works where it makes sense, and somehow most of the issues get covered. Some groups pull hundreds of thousands into the streets, some change the lives of 5 families, some focus on sustaining the environment, some focus on opening spaces for transgender people to live safely. But all of those things are happening! The important thing is how we link our struggles. There are people organizing in thousands of ways around every corner, and our potential multiplies as we learn how to connect all of our struggles in ways that strengthen all of our organizing.

While the language we use is important, especially in movement building, our actions and the ways we approach new people or other groups are even more important. CISPES has a stable foundation to work from due to the successes of our solid history of taking leadership from the movement in El Salvador.

As Cheryl Brown puts it in her essay *Organizing on Shifting Ground*, the direct links to grassroots organizing abroad that the solidarity model maintains has "particularly helped the white liberal base of the solidarity movement. According to Jan Adams [an activist who during the '80s took a leadership role in framing international solidarity as something that begins and ends at home], 'Being able to communicate directly with Nicaraguans enabled us to make what was happening personal. It is usually very difficult for Americans to accord any reality to what is happening in other people's countries... But when you have a person or community to talk and work with it makes a huge difference'" (A). (Although I'm sure it wasn't intentional, attention should be called to the inappropriate use here of the word "American" to generally refer to white liberals.) Many people from across this hemisphere - the Americas - consider themselves American. She reminds us that the Central America solidarity movement has done a great job helping white liberals better understand the reality in "other people's countries". But we don't have to go as far as El Salvador to make our work personal. Most oppressed people in the U.S., many of whom have Latin American ancestry (and many of whom also identify as American), do not have a hard time understanding realities of other countries because they are actually, in many cases, similar to their own experiences.

I've found that when I talk with working class, oppressed people in the U.S. about what's happening in El Salvador, most understand right away and relate to the

situation because they experience the same domination here in the U.S. To make our work personal, one initial step we can take is engage in dialogue with oppressed folks in the U.S. Spend a couple hours waiting in line at the Department of Corrections at 850 Bryant St and chat with the regulars, or hang out at the U.N. Plaza at the Civic Center and observe who the cops are removing from the Simón Bolívar statue and cuffing in embarrassingly uncomfortable positions next to the newly roped-off "public" turned "no trespassing" fountain. However, making these observations is just the first step. Next comes action!

Cecelie Counts, assistant director of the AFL-CIO's Education Department, speaks from her involvement with the anti-apartheid movement. " 'You must start where people are and work out,' she says, 'you can't start out and work in. Start with a local community problem... We tried it the other way, outward in, but it doesn't work. More people want to come out or get involved because there's no grocery store in their neighborhood than want to work to improve conditions in a neighborhood in some other country' " (A). The idea is to challenge ourselves to ask questions that make the connection between why there is no grocery store in the neighborhood, and why so many Central American farmers are forced to grow food products for export only while their families barely scrape by on the starvation wages they make. Asking questions like "Where is all that food going? Who is consuming it? Who can afford it? What U.S. neighborhoods have grocery stores that carry the 'exotic' fruits from Latin American countries at high prices?"

### Cross border solidarity at home and abroad

Initiating dialogue like this is an opening step toward building relationships with organizations led by people of color. If these relationships are based on dialogue and trust-building, they can move toward becoming mutually beneficial coalitions of *cross border solidarity at home*. One example of how we have started doing this in the Bay Area is the popular education workshops on globalization we have been doing with the Day Labor program using Equipo Maiz books on globalization and neoliberalism as a tool. We don't have all the answers, and since we are just in the first stage of this relationship building process, we don't expect many immediate results. Our goal in doing these workshops is not to get Day Labor workers to join the CISPES chapter! They are already consumed with the trying task of struggling to survive this system. Our motivation for doing the workshops has been to develop an interchange with them, and to begin a process of building trust and solidarity with them. In the workshops, we are providing information and facts about neoliberalism, privatization, free trade, and in return the workers (those who want to) are sharing with us their experiences of the

effects those same systems have on workers in this country.

This interchange has served as a process of political and leadership development in our committee. Through planning and leading these workshops, we not only have discussions about how to link the effects of globalization in El Salvador to the residents of the U.S., but we also then have a space to discuss it a lot closer to home and develop a deeper understanding of how globalization and free trade function, and how to challenge those systems most effectively.

How do we ensure the capacity for this transformation process?

Making these connections is a challenge that we face not only in standing in international solidarity with struggles for liberation in other countries, but *it is also a challenge we face in mobilizing U.S. communities.* Supporting U.S. resistance led by the oppressed (especially people of color, women, queer folks, trans folks) is how we can build our long term capacity to not only to respond to and support the struggles in El Salvador, but also guarantee the long term capacity of the U.S. movement to take on serious revolutionary change. And there are a lot of questions we need to continually ask ourselves. What does it mean to be a predominantly white organization in U.S. organizing? Who do we define as our community? Is it the communities CISPES activists live in? Does it correspond to the neighborhood that the local office is in? How do we take on more locally based organizing when many of our committees are already struggling to find the capacity to carry out our program? Are they mutually exclusive? What are some ways that more community based organizing in solidarity with oppressed communities in the U.S. can build stronger chapters with more capacity to respond to situations in El Salvador?

Who are we mobilizing? Do we expect people of color who organize their communities around issues of survival to be interested in (or have the energy for) organizing with CISPES? Is our intention to "incorporate" them into our committees, or is it to build a broader sense of solidarity and strengthen our own political and leadership development? What kind of movement are we building? What would all of this look like?

*"People will never accept injustice and domination as their fate. Revolution is not in the books, it's in the people, in their mistakes, in their victories."*

— Salvador Cordon, FMLN-SF

## Bibliography

- (A) Cheryl Brown "Organizing on Shifting Ground", 2001
- (B) Elizabeth (Betita) Martinez, "What is White Supremacy?"
- (C) Chris Crass "White Supremacy On My Mind: Learning To Undermine Racism"
- (D) Howard Zinn People's History of the United States. "Drawing the Color Line", p. 27-28
- (E) Luis Lorenzano "Zapatismo: Recomposition of Labour, Radical Democracy and Revolutionary Project", from Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico (edited by John Holloway & Eloina Peláez) pp.126-158.

## Works Not Cited

- \* Angela Sanbrano & Mike Zielinski, *Undoing Racism in the Central America Movement*, Dec 1990
- \* Lisa Brock, *History, Power and Racism in the Movement*, Dec 1990
- \* Chrystos "I Don't Understand Those Who Have Turned Away From Me"
- \* Palmer "Black Nationalism Promotes Concept of Racial Solidarity"
- \* Material generated by: Challenging White Supremacy, and the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond
- \*\* Many others I can't remember!