

FIGHTING WHITE SUPREMACY IN PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENTS

By Sharon Martinas

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Last April, 6000 people marched in Los Angeles to protest police brutality after the videoed beating of Rodney King. Most of the marchers were African American. In January, 20,000 Los Angelans had demonstrated against the war in Iraq. Most of those marchers were white. Since both demonstrations were protesting government terrorism against peoples of color, why didn't the white progressives also hit the streets in April?

The answer, I think, is that there is no political immunization protecting European American progressives against the virus of white supremacy that has infected our world for at least the past 500 years.

When I use the term "white supremacy," I mean an historically based, institutionally perpetuated, system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations and peoples of color, by white peoples and nations of the European continent; for the purpose of establishing, maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power and privilege.

White supremacy is the linchpin of imperialism, the system whose injustices all our movements are fighting. Because it is so central, we can't treat white supremacy as just another issue, to add to our list of demands if it won't alienate important constituencies. There's no neutrality here. Either we're actively fighting white supremacy or, by our silence, we're supporting it.

But, how can we begin to fight it effectively? One way is to use this period of organizing for the 500 years of resistance to examine four legacies of U.S. history which might suggest directions appropriate to the struggle.

Legacy #1: The USA is a nation born of the Holocausts

Capitalism came into the world dripping with blood. From the 15th to the 19th centuries, Europeans built their cities, nation-states, businesses and bank accounts on the gold, silver and land of the Indigenous Americans; and on the slave trade and enslavement of Africans. In the process, Europeans slaughtered from 60-100 million Native Americans and 100 million Africans.

Out of these holocausts came the United States, the first European nation and the first capitalist system created from scratch entirely from the theft of land of the Native Americans and the enslaved labor of Africans. The European American colonists used the riches amassed from the stolen land and the enslaved labor to fund their war of Independence against Britain and to open up their new nation state to millions of Europeans who came seeking life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

This history teaches us two lessons: First: United States capitalism was created on a foundation of subjugation of nations and continents of peoples of color. Economic exploitation and national oppression are twin peas in the pod of the capitalist system.

Second: the subjugation of peoples of color is the material basis of white or European supremacy in the United States. The lives of poor and working class European Americans were wretched because capitalist exploitation is ruthless, regardless of skin color or national origin. But the fact remains that for 500 years the dreams of freedom of millions of European immigrants have been realized only through the nightmare of domination of every Native American and African.

Our political demands must reflect this history, if we are ever to challenge the fundamental structures of injustice in this country. Every demand for economic justice must be paired with a demand to rectify the injustice of white supremacy. For example: when we demand more money for our schools, we must also demand that every school provide education reflecting the true histories and contributions of peoples of color. When we tell the U.S. to stop funding destructive wars overseas, we should demand that the money be used to rebuild Harlem or Hunters Point for the people who live there.

If we continue to focus only on the economic injustices of capitalism, or we use vague terms like "Fund human needs," instead of demanding reparations for the special injustices against peoples of color, we will, by our silence, be complicit in supporting the institutions of white supremacy.

Legacy #2: U.S. Imperialism is a Two-Faced Monster that Knows no Borders

From sea to shining sea, the United States grew by one big land grab. First, it gobbled up Native American lands. Then it stole half of Mexico. Next, it boarded a gunboat and captured Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Then, it forged the Rio Grande and staked out a claim on every piece of turf from Tijuana to Tierra del Fuego. And finally, it hopped a plane and landed on Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Everywhere the United States goes, it has the same goal: Rip off the lands, resources and labor power of nations of color to haul in megabucks for the white ruling class and minibucks for the rest of European America. And everywhere the U.S. goes, it uses the same methods to try to crush the resistance of nations and peoples of color: guns, dollars, Dallas, Disney, relocation, religion, drugs and democracy.

U.S. imperialism is a two-faced monster that knows no borders. It gobbles up here and it gobbles up there. Like an evil image in a mirror, its forms of oppression are twinned on both sides of the borders.

If imperialism twins oppression, then anti-imperialism should twin solidarity. When we protest the capture of a Salvadoran activist, let's also demand the release of Geronimo Pratt and Leonard Peltier. When we demand that Israel cease deporting Palestinians, let's also tell the U.S. to cease deporting Mexicans. Both peoples have a right to remain in their ancestral homelands.

We don't need to make the links between international and national struggles of peoples of color. Imperialism has already done that for us. But we do need to point them out. Solidarity begins at home. By supporting the struggles for self-determination of peoples of color on both sides of the border, we will be helping to strengthen their capacity to slay the two-faced monster.

Legacy #3: Division is the Strategy of the Slave Masters

In the early 17th century, the colony of Virginia was plagued by rebellions. Africans and Europeans both worked as unpaid contract labor, and they often united in revolt against their cruel employers. In one famous insurrection, the laborers, who were supposed to defend the colony against the Indians, turned their guns around on their bosses and nearly destroyed the colonial power.

Terrified colonists decided to break the back of this unified resistance. They did so by the strategy of the stick and the carrot. Europeans who conspired with Africans were dismembered; their terms of servitude extended. Europeans who demanded better treatment, but only for themselves, got a patch of land, their freedom, and a tiny bit of political power. Their masters replaced the contract labor of Europeans with the enslaved labor of Africans.

The strategy was brilliant. The punishments deterred all but the most courageous Europeans from making common cause with Africans. The rewards wiped out the material basis for unity between the most exploited class of Europeans, and all Africans, by granting freedom to the whites while enslaving the Blacks. The strategy set a precedent, which remains to this day, that if the European oppressed protest in their own self interest only, refusing to unite with oppressed peoples of color, they will gain short term victories. And the rule of the European slave masters will never be seriously threatened.

Virtually every white progressive movement since the colonial era has fallen into the slavemaster's trap. The 19th century women's movement refused to support political rights for African Americans in order to win the vote for white women. Today, the vote of European American women does little more than reinforce the white male power structure. The trade union movement was built on the exclusion of African Americans, Chinese and Mexicans. Today, European American workers have less rights and protections than workers in any other European nation.

When we in the white progressive movements mobilize 20,000 Los Angelans to protest the US war against Iraq, but do nothing to protest the US war against Watts, we are reproducing the strategy of the slave master. We may win important short term victories, but the movements of resistance remain divided. And reaction has been running over all the people's movements like a steam roller.

Can we turn this around? Yes. Will it take a lot of work? Yes! Might we have to sacrifice some of our hard won, but short lived victories? Yes. Will we probably lose some of our supporters and coalition partners? Yes. Will doors of access to legitimacy be closed on us? Yes.

The choices are not easy. But as we slowly build unity among our resistance movements, two steps forward and one step back, we'll be moving on a path that someday will truly challenge the power of the slavemasters.

Legacy #4: Peoples, Nations and Continents of Color have been resisting white supremacy for 500 years

This legacy doesn't need explanation, but it can be our guide to action. In 1992, we'll all be commemorating these 500 years of resistance. We white progressives will be joining activists of color in unwelcoming those envoys of white supremacy, the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria.

But we can do more. Each of our respective organizations could decide that we will commemorate the 500 years of resistance by adding a new principle of unity to those which already bind our organization together. That principle would be to commit ourselves to the fight against white supremacy, and to act in solidarity with the struggles of peoples of color, within as well as outside U.S. borders.

With this concrete goal and timetable in mind, we could begin now to educate our constituencies about the importance of this principle. And in so doing, we would be taking a small, yet vital step forward in the struggle against white supremacy.

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