

AN OPEN LETTER TO ACTIVISTS CONCERNING RACISM IN THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT

February 13, 2003

DEAR SISTERS AND BROTHERS:

We, the undersigned, are peace and justice activists in New York City. We are organizing to defeat the United States government's offensive of war, racism and repression against the people of the world, both abroad and within the borders of the U.S. We come from many communities, some of us from other nations. We are all colors, multi-generational, workers, students, unemployed, queer and straight. We are writing to you out of concern that destructive patterns of behavior are hindering the growth of the broadest possible long-term movement against war at home and abroad, and preventing the attainment of the social justice we all seek.

We have urgent tasks before us: stopping a war against Iraq and others around the world, as well as preventing further attacks on people within the United States. To do this work in a principled way, in ways that address the root causes of oppression, requires that we acknowledge the connection between the forms and institutions of white supremacy embedded in U.S. society and the practice of white supremacy within our movement. As we dig in for the long haul and try to bring together the broadest possible grouping of people, we must be conscious of how our histories—organizational and personal—influence how we work together.

BACKGROUND

Since the turn of the year, hundreds of activists have come together in New York City to plan anti-war actions. Along with the work being done for February 15, these gatherings will hopefully lead to more and better coalition-building in the future. However, at least two other promising coordination efforts in this city, since 9/11/2001, also began by involving diverse forces and ended badly. One series of meetings, attended by hundreds, led to the formation of the New York Coalition for Peace and Justice—but only after a disastrous split around the question of calling for the use of “international law” as an alternative to war against Afghanistan. A second series of meetings, held last Spring to plan antiwar commemorations of 9/11, produced Stand Up New York—but that coalition foundered when one group insisted on organizing a vigil “autonomously,” without being responsible to the coalition as a whole. In our view, destructive racial dynamics and white supremacy are implicated in the disruption of both of these unity initiatives: Predominantly white forces failed to grasp the importance of self-determination and certain concerns in communities of color. Indeed, this was the clear perception of most activists of color who were involved in the events.

The problem of racism in anti-war activism is not new. For many years, people of color and their white allies have cited its debilitating effects, to no avail. A new era of activism presents us with the opportunity to come to grips with the issues of race and anti-racism in our movement, instead of continuing to ignore them. We believe that such an accounting is crucial to the success of coalition-building among the anti-war sectors of New York City, and we offer this letter as a means of getting started.

WHO IS MOST AFFECTED BY WAR

At home and abroad, repression, militarism and war take their greatest toll on people of color. Following 9/11, the U.S. government and its agents escalated their longstanding aggression against us to the level of an endless “war on terrorism.” Abroad, that war is waged on Iraq, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Colombia, Vieques, Puerto Rico, and other nations in the global South. “Endless war” crowns the economic embargos and sanctions, IMF/World Bank—generated debt, covert support for torture and death squads, and environmental degradation long imposed on nations whose inhabitants are viewed through a Eurocentric lens as alien demons, in order to rationalize their domination and destruction. At home, the state demonizes and criminalizes people of color in order to rationalize targeting us for police abuse and repression, in the name of “crime-fighting” and “security.” Secret detention and deportation of immigrants, racial profiling, police brutality, incarceration and cut-backs of social services are all part of the arsenal used by the state to control communities of color and constrain their development.

As the primary victims of militarism and repression, people of color have waged organized resistance against these scourges for centuries, without recognition of our frontline activism by whites: We know only too well, if others do not, that the peace movement has always been multiracial and international. Consistent with this history, Arab, Asian, Latino, Caribbean and African Americans were organizing in their New York City communities before 9/11, and since the 9/11 attacks have turned out significant numbers on several occasions. For example, there were the 9/11 anniversary/anti-war events sponsored by Third World Within, under the banner “No More Lost Lives,” and there was the “We Ain’t Going Nowhere” march and rally in Harlem sponsored by Uptown Youth for Peace and Justice. In addition, South Asian and Arab American community-based groups have spearhead street protests downtown and in Times Square against detentions and other abuses of immigrant rights that continue to this day.

THE MOVEMENT TODAY: REACHING THE MAINSTREAM

The anti-war movement as a whole can take great pride in the national mobilizations that brought hundreds of thousands to Washington, D.C. on April 22, October 26 and January 18. Undaunted by the drumbeat for an invasion of Iraq and heightened repression at home, our

movement has mounted an undeniable challenge to policies that, if allowed to prevail, can only lead to the devastation of peoples and nations. The success of these demonstrations was due, in no small part, to the hard work done by diverse grass roots, neighborhood-based groups in New York and other locales.

The energy and commitment emanating from our local anti-war formations create a good basis for developing future peace and justice work in our city. But to realize our potential for building a mass movement requires, first and foremost, clarity as to who actually constitutes the “mainstream” and why. The right, the corporate media and elite policy makers persist in painting “mainstream America” as white and middle class. Even many white liberals cling to the notion that building a mass movement against war necessitates the use of techniques and rhetoric that “don’t scare away” middle class whites. This way of thinking is anachronistic. The nation’s demographics have changed sharply over the last 40 years, even more dramatically over the last decade, with the result that people of color are fast becoming a majority in the U.S. More importantly, since people of color—war’s principal targets—have the greatest interest in holding back the war tide and, thus, activists of color have the most politically developed perspectives on the subject, they are a key source of ideas on how to strengthen work and improve outreach. Add to this the fact that more and more white working class and middle class families are struggling to survive under the crushing burden of globalization’s negative effects and it becomes clear that resistance against the Bush war machine must reflect the spectrum of needs, aspirations, goals, intellectual resources and colors of a multiracial, multinational, multilingual and multi-class mainstream.

Unfortunately, white supremacy and white privilege in our work present obstacles that, if left unaddressed, will limit our ability to consolidate an effective movement within today’s realities.

ADDRESSING WHITE SUPREMACY IN THE PEACE AND JUSTICE MOVEMENT

A persistent dynamic of white supremacy/racism and white privilege within many organizations, and the resultant perpetuation of racist practices, takes various forms: resistance by predominantly white organizations to sharing leadership with—much less *following* the leadership of—activists and organizations of color; the failure of predominantly white organizations to endorse or participate in anti-war activities sponsored by people of color groups; a discussion climate that excludes or demeans the contributions of activists/organizations of color, and disparaging or insensitive remarks by individuals. These practices have alienated individuals and organizations, and they have prevented cooperative bonds from forming as we work to build broad and deep opposition to war.

Serious attempts have been made in the past to build anti-racist/racial justice politics among white activists. Yet we still see white activists and predominantly white organizations acting in ways that effectively marginalize and disrespect activists and organizations of color in anti-war work.

While many of these individuals and organizations view themselves as anti-racist, their words and actions—consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or not—replicate white supremacy and white privilege. In addition, they advocate certain positions within the movement that fail to address, and in some instances actually support, structural white supremacy.

DEFINITIONS

What do we mean by white supremacy and white privilege? We are unaware of any universally agreed upon definitions, but we have found those put forth by the Challenging White Supremacy Workshop (CWS at <http://www.cwsworkshop.org>) to be useful. CWS states that white supremacy is a system, historically constructed by white peoples, European nations and the United States, to exploit and oppress nations and peoples of color. The point of the system is to maintain and perpetuate wealth, power and privilege for nations and peoples of European descent. White privilege is also a system, institutionally based, that (1) rewards and privileges white people solely because of their skin color and European origins; and (2) exempts whites and European-descended peoples from oppression. White supremacy anchors white privilege and racial oppression in our society, meaning that it is not simply about individual prejudice. Individual and organizational acts of racial prejudice are rooted in, and replicate, an entire social construct of white supremacy. If we wish to build a lasting peace and justice movement that effectively unites the broadest possible strata of society, then our fight against racism must be fully conscious and ongoing. We must face the issue externally in our platforms, positions and actions, and internally in our movement work.

EXAMPLES OF WHITE SUPREMACY & PRIVILEGE WITHIN THE NYC PEACE & JUSTICE MOVEMENT

Based on the foregoing definitions, here are examples of practices that we and other movement activists have witnessed in peace and justice activities since 9/11/2001:

Refusing to acknowledge and accept leadership from activists and organizations of color:

- refusing to participate in people of color-led events.
- refusing to participate in broad anti-war activities with strong POC participation or leadership, e.g., the summer split when War Resisters League withdrew from Stand Up New York (commemoration of September 11).
- white groups starting coalitions without input from, or honest outreach to, organizations of color and then calling their groups “citywide.” One activist dismissed the lack of input and outreach, saying “I long ago gave up paying attention to skin color... On such matters, I’m with Dr. King... What’s important about people is not the color of their skin, but the content of their character.”
- white activists making strategy decisions without consulting activists of color, whose work is critical to implementing the decisions.

- white activists using their greater financial or volunteer resources to attract resources, and to dominate leadership or staff positions and decision-making (“do it my way, and I’ll raise the dollars”).

A variation on “divide and rule”: White activists using rhetoric in a discussion that effectively pits groups against each other, particularly groups of color—for example, insinuating that one group has unfairly tried to dominate space within a project that must accommodate the interests of many different sectors.

Promoting positions that challenge the impact of war on more privileged populations, while ignoring or even justifying its impact on people of color and immigrants.

- refusing to recognize the centrality of white supremacy and racism in the war drive at home and abroad. One long-time peace activist in reference to the U.S. war against Afghanistan, “A racist war? It isn’t. Vietnam was. But the Afghans for the most part are not dark skinned. A criminal war, yes. An illegal war, yes. An unconstitutional war, yes. But a racist war? Bull shit.”
- denying the impact on people of color of the war at home and abroad.
- denying that non-Arab people of color within the U.S. are particularly targeted by the war.
- appealing to racism or national chauvinism in opposing the war.

Discrediting, ignoring or minimizing the history and prominent roles of people of color in the peace and justice movement:

- “dissing” or discrediting people of color organizations.
- dismissing the roles of people of color in anti-war movements: One movement activist claimed that Angela Davis and Muhammad Ali were not serious anti-war activists during the Vietnam war.
- engaging in “the politics of privileged projection”: Some white activists, comfortable with a “white” peace movement, claim that activists of color are “too busy with domestic issues” to do anti-war work. This perception can be a cover for the white person’s enthusiastic involvement in activism against the war abroad, but indifference to opposing the wars at home—which, after all, primarily target communities and people of color. Apparently, it hasn’t occurred to this activist that his/her “whiteness,” along with class privilege, both enables and influences the luxury of choosing on which issues s/he will focus.

Creating an atmosphere of marginalization, disrespect or neglect towards people of color in anti-war meetings and events:

- white activists tending to dominate discussions and favor the most “articulate”

- not calling on activists of color to speak and chair meetings.
- white people assuming that their experiences are the norm, and viewing people of color's realities as the "other" or "the exception."
- judging what political approach will work with "the average person" by the experience in white neighborhoods.
- using terms like "us" and "them."

Creating an environment in meetings, through certain actions, that is threatening to, or uncomfortable for, immigrants

- exposing immigrants and other people of color to the risk of arrest in civil disobedience (CD) actions, or promoting CD in communities of color without understanding that immigrants risk jail, deportation and/or police violence that could lead to serious injury or death.
- insensitivity to immigrants' religious and cultural practices.

Such practices reproduce in our movement the white supremacy that permeates U.S. society. A similar dynamic involves class: those with greater access to education, wealth and power often marginalize working people... and involves gender: male supremacy creates unfavorable conditions for women's equal participation. Most white activists don't see how "whiteness" privileges them and perpetuates white supremacist social relations in movement work. White activists have a responsibility to struggle against white supremacy, a struggle that includes: 1) Sharing leadership with, and being willing to follow the lead of, people and organizations of color; 2) maintaining an attitude of collectivity and not dominating discussion; 3) challenging racist language and actions (especially within movement spaces), and 4) prioritizing the issues, experiences and struggles of people of color.

IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP OF COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

Real peace can only be achieved if our movement comes to understand, and addresses, the racist roots of modern militarism and warfare. It follows, therefore, that real justice can only be achieved if the people most affected by injustice are in the leadership of movements seeking change. By no means do we discount the role of white activists and predominantly white organizations within the peace and justice movement. In order to achieve the broadest and strongest opposition to war, we need unified action across all lines—and white communities are obviously an integral part of that movement-building. But especially in New York City, given its racial and ethnic composition, people of color must have a place at the helm in coalition work. White activists and predominantly white groups must tackle this issue directly. In a country founded on genocide, slavery and territorial conquest, that is still plagued by racism and by the unequal distribution of power and resources, people of color can tell when white folks don't welcome their input, much less their leadership. And understandably, we are turned off of trying to work with people who dismiss, marginalize or

patronize us. In addition to treating people of color with respect, white activists and groups need to embrace the principle of power-sharing and the sharing of resources.

Activists of color who are on the receiving end of racist behavior face vexing decisions about whether or how to interact with predominantly white projects. Some opt to concentrate on building a base in their own communities. Others work in multiracial settings, where they often find themselves the brunt of racist dynamics. In the latter case, unpleasant experiences have made some people skeptical about white activists' dedication to power-sharing and fighting white supremacy. For those activists of color who are committed to citywide organizing, despite being tempted to dismiss the so-called "white left" (an oxymoron), it's important that white activists indicate a willingness to engage in a serious dialogue within the context of political struggle.

We ask peace and justice activists in NYC to reflect on the content of this letter, discuss it and respond. How can our organizations and coalitions best deal with these problems? We look forward to a dialogue on the issues. Most important, we hope and expect that out of that dialogue will come lasting changes in the ways we work together.

In solidarity,

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- To respond to this letter, please email the signers at: antiracistmovement@yahoo.com.