

AN ANTI-RACIST COALITION?

WE HAVE A LONG WAY TO GO.

New York City

October, 2001

We are a group of young(ish) white organizers and activists involved in the October 7th efforts to varying degrees. We do work that includes community organizing, youth organizing, queer movement-building, labor, Jewish community organizing, police brutality work, and philanthropy. We share a commitment to practicing anti-racist principles in our work and are concerned about the courses of action taken by this coalition and the processes it is using.

We are struggling with questions of how to integrate anti-racist principles into anti-war organizing. We don't claim to be the authorities on what anti-racist behavior looks like; we have made and continue to make mistakes in our organizing work. Specifically, during the pre-October 7th meetings, we did not do everything we could to challenge the processes and events that were disrespectful and silencing to people of color and others. We know there were other white people in the room who were also immobilized.

We feel that white organizers and activists need to examine our role as white people in a movement, to figure out the most productive roles we can play and the most principled ways to do that. Because we haven't made thinking critically about our racism enough of a priority, we weren't prepared to play an effective role in building an empowering multi-racial coalition. We feel strongly, that at this moment it must become our top priority. In the interest of building an empowering multi-racial anti-racist movement that can impact the

war abroad, the violence at home, and the forces that have created them, we are offering specific observations and suggestions ^ especially for those of us who are white ^ in hopes of sparking dialogue, thought, and change.

It is extremely important for people to come together now and the idea of bringing together citywide coalitions to coordinate efforts is a good one. People participating in this coalition and other coalitions and organizations in the city are taking up an important fight by calling for peace at this juncture. So, concerns about how this coalition has been functioning become critically important.

PRIVILEGE SHAPES OUR EXPERIENCE AND PRIORITIES

The coalition that organized the October 7th March describes itself as "anti-racist", but has not been operating according to anti-racist principles. Anti-racist principles ^ and multi-racial coalition- or movement-building ^ demands that white people recognize how our lived experience shapes our perspectives and the priorities we set in our activism. It also demands that we struggle to step back from our power and learn to share it (and our resources) with people of color, take guidance from those most affected by a situation and recognize and correct the ways the privilege we carry can blind us as we make decisions and take action.

Everyone in New York and beyond is affected by the situation. But in almost every case, white people are the least affected. We are not subject to the vigilante threats and violence, to the immigration and police crackdown, to the racial profiling and indefinite detention. Additionally, most white folks do not have family or homelands that are being and have been destroyed by the U.S. military. It is safe to say that white people have a very specific and somewhat limited understanding of the dangers and impact of what is unfolding. Therefore, a coalition whose priorities are set mostly by white people is bound to be limited and incomplete. We need to commit to accepting guidance from and being accountable to the communities that are most affected in this situation.

THE APPROACH TO COALITION-BUILDING IS INADEQUATE AND SHORT-SIGHTED

It's clear that the overwhelming majority of people who come to these meetings and the people who take leadership at them are white. Many white people look at this, know there is something wrong with it, and express a desire to change it. What we need to do is ask why there are so few people of color in the room, and not be satisfied with easy answers like "We just didn't do enough outreach." Simply doing outreach to people of color is not the answer to challenging the racism within the process. This line of logic continues to place the responsibility for challenging racism on people of color (and not on us). It also reaffirms the concept that as long as there are people of color within a coalition, the coalition can't be racist- which is simply not true. If we want to build a multi-racial coalition, not to mention a multi-racial movement that is empowering for everyone involved, bringing more people of color into white-led organizations is not the way to go. We have to learn to change the way we work, the culture, the leadership and the assumptions implicit in our work. We need to listen to what people and communities of color have to say about their priorities, and be willing to revise what we

thought was most important. We have to be prepared that this may mean that we have to slow down, back up or change our plan of action all together.

This is not to say that white people should follow people of color like sheep. White people need to engage critically and constructively with all our comrades and to strike a difficult balance between knowing when to offer leadership and when to follow the leadership of others.

Suggestions for improvement:

" People need to acknowledge that this coalition is not "THE city-wide coalition against war," as it has been called. There are several others, including at least one significant coalition led by and for people of color. Some of these groups have actively and explicitly chosen to not "join" this coalition. Additionally, many smaller community-based organizations in low-income communities of color have been organizing anti-war activities entirely under the radar of the coalition. Continuing to assert our centrality is a serious disrespect to all other efforts. Additionally, efforts should be made to make a thorough survey of all the work being done in the city ^ for the purpose of supporting that work, not trying to recruit those activists to our work.

" All work for justice should support, not overshadow or disrupt, the efforts of people of color and their organizations to work for racial justice and community strength. Many people involved in the October 7th activities worked to recruit people of color and organizations based in communities of color to this coalition. Instead of taking a "come join us" approach, we need to consider what support we can offer people of color and their community organizations, and carefully (so as not to overwhelm the organizations that are already under huge demands) inquire about other activities they may be spearheading to which we could offer support (bodies, fundraising, legal assistance, etc.).

CURRENT MEETING PROCESS MARGINALIZES THE VOICES OF PEOPLE OF COLOR AND OTHERS

The meetings and decision-making have happened without a stated or enacted commitment to anti-racist principles. This has led to meeting spaces and processes that marginalize the voices of people of color, and the views of organized groups representing communities of color. It has also resulted in many people ^ especially young people ^ not returning to the space because it feels hostile.

In addition to the processes for speaking being unclear and poorly practiced (so that people were allowed to speak out of turn), the conversation that unfolded around the 6th point of unity was a red flag that white arrogance was in play. Activists of color who raised serious concerns about how an international investigation and trail would be bound up with U.S. racist and imperialist structures were not heard. Additionally, the fact that 2 people of color led organizations walked out at that point was also a clear indication that the coalition was not listening or respecting the voices and opinions of those most affected. We (as white folks) cannot afford, to continue to break movements by our refusal to listen to and

respect others.

Suggestions for improvement:

The group needs to spend some serious time developing a process that prevents the marginalization of the voices of people of color, even in an overwhelmingly white crowd. This is also necessary for other groups often silenced, including young people and working-class folks.

" The group should enact groundrules for meetings that ensure the voices of people of color are heard, particularly Muslim, Arab, South Asian and Immigrant folks of all backgrounds. One way to structurally prioritize these voices is to allow white people to speak only after a person of color has spoken. This can help ensure the discussion includes a more balanced mix of viewpoints.

" Facilitators (and participants as well) must be aware of discussions that break down primarily along racial lines. When this situation comes up in the future, the coalition (guided by the facilitators) needs to first acknowledge those dynamics and their implications. It is a good idea to table all other discussions and decisions to be made so that the particular issue at hand is dealt with respectfully and given the amount of time it deserves in order to be resolved. In addition, facilitators should consult with other radical people of color leaders as to what direction the conversation should take. White folks should spend this time to question their perspectives and assumptions, dialogue with each other and self-reflect.

" Facilitators and working-group point people have to be committed to challenging the marginalization of people of color and implementing groundrules. This includes posting and going over ground rules at the beginning of a meeting. Those who do not agree to and/ or do not follow the ground rules are free to leave. Another possibility is to always allow and respect the need for people of color to caucus (either as a part of the larger coalition or within each of the working groups) and for the decisions made within the caucuses to be respected by all.

In hindsight, it is safe to say that these types of groundrules should have been implemented from the beginning. Along with groundrules like:

" The leadership body and/or facilitating team should be majority people of color. The same goes for working group leadership and working group point people. In a city that is 70% people of color, it is a good idea to have no more than 30% of the leadership/ facilitation be white.

Given the current make-up of the coalition and the fact that many of the organizations, coalitions and leaders working in people of color communities have chosen to leave this coalition (or never join) because it doesn't reflect their interests or priorities, some of these groundrules may be unprincipled, and lead us down the road of trying to recruit people of color into this coalition, rather than moving us toward a culture and structure that makes a multi-racial coalition possible. This is a critical discussion for the immediate future of this coalition.

Regarding leadership, it has been difficult to address concerns about coalition structure and process because the leadership and decision-making bodies have been largely unknown. Among our small group, not one of us has a good sense of who meets as part of the facilitation team, who is on the structure committee, who plans the agenda. Without transparent leadership structures, de facto leadership takes over, and only those people with previous relationships to those in positions of de facto power have access to the decision-making.

CONCERNS ABOUT SAFETY, WHICH AFFECT PEOPLE OF COLOR THE MOST, HAVE NOT BEEN ADEQUATELY ADDRESSED

The coalition has paid little attention to what is happening right here in New York ^ harassment, abuse and intimidation of our Arab, Muslim, South-Asian and immigrant comrades. There has been little discussion of how to address this along with the other work we are doing. Most significantly, there was little discussion of fear and/or safety for the October 7th march itself. There was inadequate concern for safety of those marching, no instructions to marshals on how to deal with counter-protestors or racist attacks from civilians or police.

Suggestions for improvement:

" Security at all events dealing with these events (post WTC) should be planned and implemented carefully, and guided by the knowledge that people of color are always going to be more in danger and more targeted by law enforcement than we as white people can really know. The best situation is to have those folks making security decisions to be people of color skilled in planning security for major demonstrations.

" Everyone should have legal assistance information, know your rights info and guidelines for keeping each other safe during events.
" There should be guidelines for things that people, especially white folks, should not do to instigate violence from the police.

We need to consider the fact that we are not going to end this war anytime soon, especially if we stay as limited a group as we are. Our desires and goals are going to require a broader movement, so we have to think of this as a long-term movement-building situation. And while voices for peace must be heard at this moment, we cannot afford to hold any more meetings or events that turn people off and break relationships. We (our small group of 10) watched several talented young leaders walk out of meetings feeling silenced ^ with no intent to come back. We watched others stay away because of the experience of their peers.

Any discussions about how this group should move forward after October 7th should focus on how we can use this moment, and any future efforts, to build the relationships, trust and practice necessary to sustain and build a broad-based movement to end U.S. militarism abroad and racist attacks on communities of color in the United States. We believe that this trust will only be built if white people chose to challenge their own racism and make a commitment to being allies to communities of color in the struggle against racism and white supremacy.

It is pretty clear that we as white activists are unable to be as effective as necessary in this moment and we suggest that all white folks seek out an anti-racism training (preferably led by younger folks), participate in discussions about the ways we can work from anti-racist principles and begin or continue to challenge your own assumptions. We strongly suggest this for white folks in leadership positions, including working group point people. If you would like to participate in an anti-racism training, we can suggest some that are being planned in the near future.

Right now, the United States government and its allies are destroying what was left of Afghanistan. Right now, the United States government and its allies are continuing its repressive policies around the world, continuing the cycle of killing innocent people in the name of "democracy and freedom." Right now, our Arab, Muslim, and immigrant neighbors are being harassed and intimidated, or are simply not leaving their homes because of fear. Right now 6,000 families are mourning the losses of loved ones. Right now is the time for us, as activists and organizers, to recognize the dire situation we are in, and have been in for too long. We need to stop making these same mistakes decade after decade, war after war.

As young people engaged in struggle to build an anti-racist anti-war movement and a just society, we hope that this statement might make a contribution to a dialogue which can help us move this struggle onward.

If you have questions, comments, suggestions or would like to contact us for any other reason, please email us at raje_nyc@h...

We welcome and strongly encourage feedback.

Thank you

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