

**Still We Rise:
conversations with organizers on building global
justice movements and ending war
by Chris Crass**

"We don't have much time, we need to slow down." The first time I heard this was at an antiwar coalition meeting shortly after the bombing of Afghanistan started. The African American organizer who said it was talking about the need to hold on, to think about our possible actions and to prioritize what would be the most strategic use of our limited time and resources. She was talking about patient, reflective action in the midst of chaos.

The need to respond to racist attacks, US bombings and the dismantling of civil liberties is real. However, being frantic doesn't mean getting things done and being busy isn't the same as being effective. I am accustomed to crisis organizing, where folks are routinely frantic, burn-out and turn-over are high, long-term memory and planning are minimal and highs of success are fewer than lows of frustration. Yet reflective action, at its best, includes planning, goal setting, leadership development and evaluation to strengthen future efforts.

This essay is part of a larger project with Elizabeth 'Betita' Martinez, of the Institute for MultiRacial Justice. We wanted to talk with activists and organizers around the country to hear about major areas of difficulty and prevailing directions in the growing antiwar movement. We wanted to hear people's thoughts about building a strong and vibrant antiwar current in larger society. Additionally, we wanted to hear how people are strengthening the antiracist current in the antiwar movement. Martinez has talked mostly with organizers of color, while I have talked mostly with white organizers. Each essay is guided by the belief that our hope for long-term social change lies with radical multiracial movements and that much work is needed to get to that point.

Sharon Martinas of the Challenging White Supremacy Collective in San Francisco outlined three key areas of work for white activists doing antiwar work:

1. Internal political education on antiracism and anti-imperialism. Martinas explained that there is a long history in antiwar resistance of white domination and marginalization of people of color. Studying history and examining how white privilege undermines social change movements is needed to avoid repeating past mistakes. She also emphasized the need to learn about US imperialism and how it negatively impacts communities of color at home and abroad.

2. Learning how to respectfully listen to and talk with people, white people in particular, who support the war. This means developing our confidence and ability to open up discussions with people. Developing our skills as facilitators of discussion and actively listening to where people are coming from. Martinas spoke of the importance of revolutionary humility and not acting like one has the correct line.

3. Explore relationships and alliances with local grassroots organizations of color who have a similar political background. Ask what they need right now. This is a strategy to both organize around the local and global impacts of US policy and commit to building relationships that will strengthen our long-term work. Much of this work will be taking on concrete tasks and it will help give white activists an experiential understanding of racial justice work.

Many of the barriers, challenges, insights and examples that other organizers discussed fall into the three categories that Martinas laid out.

Thoughts on Political Education

Political education, internally and externally, has been identified by many as the key component to successful organizing in this period. For Dara Silverman, an organizer with United for a Fair Economy and Tekiah: A

Jewish Call to Justice in Boston, this has the potential to bring critical attention in the US to Israel and the Palestinian liberation struggle. At the UN World Conference Against Racism, held in August of 2001 in South Africa, the struggle against Israeli apartheid was front and center. With international solidarity building, Silverman argued that now progressives in the United States need to take a stand against the occupation. The complexity of politics and history in the Middle East, and specifically in Palestine/Israel, has been cited by many activists as an enormous barrier to developing antiwar consciousness.

Silverman explained that while it is presented as too confusing and too complex to take a stand, in fact many of the historical injustices that we clearly identify in hindsight appeared complex and confusing when they were taking place. For example, today, everyone condemns the internment camps that locked up Japanese Americans during WWII. However, as thousands of Muslims, Arabs, West Asians and North Africans are brought in for questioning and over 1000 held in detention centers, opposition is minimal. While today it would seem as though everyone at the time opposed the Vietnam War, Apartheid in South Africa, the Holocaust in Europe, in fact many did not. Those who did voice opposition were marginalized, attacked and told that they "just don't understand". Israel's occupation will also come to pass, Silverman said, and she hopes activists will recognize the need to prioritize the Palestinian struggle in our antiwar efforts. In progressive white circles, Jewish radicals have been at the forefront of solidarity work with Palestine and continue to provide crucial leadership in these times of war.

Laura Close, national field organizer for the Students Transforming And Resisting Corporations (STARC) Alliance, has been working and talking with students across the country doing antiwar actions. From conversations with students of color and white students, Close identifies two main areas for political education in the mostly white sector of the student movement that she works with: developing antiracist analysis and developing organizing skills.

In her essay, "Whiteness, Organizing, Allies and Accountability", Close writes: "Whiteness hurts everyone. Whiteness is used in the US as a model of humanity, that sets white as best/right/normal and people of color as second best/wrong/other. This makes white people like me assumptive and oblivious. That is, we tend to assume that the ways we organize events, organize opposition to the war are best/right/normal when in fact we are isolating and ignoring all sorts of people."

This dynamic of universalizing white experience is further complicated by a dynamic that Close sees repeatedly with white student activists, particularly white male activists. The dynamic is a combination of both an ignorance of what organizing is and how to build opposition to the war, and an arrogant attitude of knowing everything there is to know about being radical. She also points out that for many other white student activists, particularly women, there is a lack of confidence in one's ability to organize. Together these dynamics seriously hold back the potential for building antiwar opposition on campus. Close explains that what is needed is political education that builds the analysis, skills and confidence of activists while simultaneously challenging white privilege.

She writes, "As young organizers we often don't know what organizing is. I always got projects done (like a conference or a rally) but not until recently could I define organizing." She continues, "It's not really a theory, it's a skill set that you can summarize: (and there are variations!) Organizing is about changing the relationships of power in our society. It's about building networks, institutions, organizations that established power (the government) has to reckon with when they want to do evil things (like cut welfare or wage war). Organizing is successful when each demonstration, lobbying delegation, phone bank, banner hang, teach-in, post card delivery builds off of the step that came before it and ends with you achieving your goal. Right now, we are not building off of each other, our rallies and conferences are scattered. We're trying damn hard, for sure, but we're not building because we don't have the skills! But that

can be fixed." As field organizer for STARC, Close goes around the country working with student groups to develop analysis, confidence and skills.

Rahula Janowski also emphasized developing antiracist analysis and challenging white privilege. Janowski, an anarchist organizer, talked about a recent debate at an anarchist discussion on the war. The group was mostly white and part of the discussion centered on how anarchists should approach the attacks on civil liberties. Some argued that because anarchists believe the state to be an illegitimate institution, to petition the state for anything would be counter to anarchist principles. She writes, "Some of the folks at the meeting were using a deeply held political core value--the illegitimacy of the state--to avoid doing necessary and hard antiracist solidarity work: opposing the denial of civil liberties for people of color, specifically Arabs, Middle Eastern people and Muslims, in the wake of Sept 11th. I suspect that if and when attacks on civil liberties extend to anarchist and white radical communities, we'll be less likely to say this isn't important work."

Not everyone decides what issues to focus on. When FBI agents begin rounding up West Asians and North Africans, those communities do not choose whether or not to deal with civil liberties; the issue chooses them. This is not an argument against having a radical analysis and strategy of the issues. However, one must critically examine the ways that struggles are defined as radical and reformist and who has the privilege to turn their back on reformist struggles. Political purity is often infected with race, class and gender privileges. Janowski points to the importance of having such community discussions to bring these issues up, particularly in difficult times like these.

There are also many political education events and actions put together by multiracial groups designed to build opposition in multiple communities. Chantel Ghafari, an Iranian activist and member of POWER (People Opposing War, Empire and Rulers), explained a recent event at University of Irvine in Southern California. The coalition

which organized the event includes the Muslim, Afghan and Iranian Student Unions, Academia in Action and Act For Global Justice. They set up a Refugee Rights camp consisting of 25 tents made out of the rubber and plastic tarps used in actual refugee camps. About 20 people slept out over a three night period. Each night the coalition hosted a different event focusing on refugee awareness. Talking about refugees opened further discussion of the Middle East and US foreign policy. On display during the day was a photo exhibit from RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) documenting the conditions of refugee camps. The coalition's next action will include setting up mock land mines around school with information about Afghanistan. Creative actions like these are taking place around the country.

Building opposition in White Communities & Beyond

White people have a responsibility to talk with other white people about racism. As is often the case with political organizing, this is easier said than done. Laura McNeill, who works at JustAct: Youth Action for Global Justice, has been spending a lot of time talking with other white people who are close in her life.

"In addition to organizing with other social justice activists, I feel it's important to be opening up a space for dialogue with those in my community who do not share the same radical politics that I do. I grew up in a community near Norfolk, Virginia where many folks value the military and what it has done for them, whether providing an income to put food on the table or access to a college education. Being someone that can't overlook the strength and support many of these people have and continue to provide me to be who I am today, one can say I'm a bit conflicted when I engage in anti-war discussions with some of those closest to me. It's a tough place to start, especially when you're trying to stay focused, centered and motivated resisting against this racist war. Yet, I move on the basic instinct that people generally want to do the 'right' thing and not support harm and hatred towards others. And if given the space to raise

their own consciousness around systematic injustices such as racism, US imperialism and global US corporate dominance, they too may be willing to rediscover their voices, raise questions and challenge those injustices."

To do this work, McNeill first engages them in dialogue and listens to what they have to say. She has shared and discussed articles from alternative news sources. When the time is right, she shares her story of becoming an activist and explains her motivations for acting. She builds on similarities while also pointing out contradictions in others' arguments. She has also made comparisons between families in New York City and Afghanistan, which requires breaking down stereotypes of Middle Eastern people.

In doing so, McNeill said she has had to be aware that when people respond with anger, it is because she is expressing a different position and challenging them to think beyond their comfort zone. She said this is important to remember "because I tend to fall back into thinking it's my fault for making them upset, instead of remembering that it's these systems of oppression we live under that are making them confused, angry and driving the wedge between us."

Laura also highlighted the need to include the people we're talking with in the discussion, "I've learned that people are moved to act when they see themselves as an integral part of the solution. To reach that point, people must be given the opportunity to express themselves, their frustrations and ask questions. I'm accountable to listen, share with them what I know and have experienced and give them opportunities to plug in."

Max Elbaum, an activist since the Vietnam War era and author of a new book about late 1960s/1970s radical movements ("Revolution in the Air" forthcoming from Verso) talked about digging in for the long haul. He explained that antiwar coalitions are important because they can move rather quickly and it's important to have a visible antiwar current in society. However, there is also a need to organize on a sector-by-sector basis and sink roots

among people who are not at first ready to march in the streets. He recounted how some of the most successful organizing from the late 1960s on was conducted by activists who, as part of multiracial organizations and projects, targeted racially diverse oppressed constituencies: hospital workers, welfare recipients, factory workers, low-income neighborhood dwellers. An integral part of such work was linking opposition to war and domestic issues.

Long term base-building also set a context in which activists could effectively challenge racist attitudes among whites and point out how the system of white privilege strengthens the hand of those who exploit workers and poor people of all racial and national backgrounds. Many organizers, through years of immersion alongside ordinary folks in grassroots struggles, were able to dent the debilitating pattern of so many people in this country thinking of themselves solely as whites, seeing people of color exclusively as "the other," and being blind to any bond of class, gender, or even basic human commonality across the color line.

For building an effective antiwar movement today, Elbaum suggested that patient work with existing organizations of ordinary folks will be crucial. We can't expect people simply to come to the coalitions and antiwar groups we set up - we need to go to them in churches, unions, sewing circles, social clubs and community groups. Such groups may move toward an antiwar position more slowly than we would like. But when they do, they bring clout, and they provide support and a structure for their members to take action. For example, maybe at first it's getting someone from the group to come to a teach-in or action, then maybe asking that person to bring a few more people to the next event. Perhaps these people would be willing to arrange a political education event for their group. Throughout the process, supporting the leadership of people in those groups and offering support is key.

While sharing lessons from past work, Elbaum also stressed the need for older activists to respect and learn from the younger generations. As in the past, it is vital

to grasp the intimate connection between US war-making and racism, and the ways in which relations of white privilege play themselves out among the people we are trying to reach and within the antiwar movement itself. But the precise forms and methods for breaking racism's grip - those change with time, and it is young activists who are best positioned to take what is valuable in previous experience to develop the freshest and most effective strategies for today. In addition to being part of multiracial organizations, one strategy for building multiracial, anti-racist movement is solidarity work by mostly white groups.

Anti-racist White Solidarity Work

Lily Wang, an organizer with the Bay Area based Asian and Pacific Islander Coalition Against War, said now is not necessarily the time to be trying to all work together. She explained that there is so much that needs to be done in so many different communities, "We're struggling with how to work in dozens of different Asian Immigrant communities, let alone how to work in multiracial coalitions where immigrants and non-English speaking activists are often marginalized." She said that white activists should check in with organizations of color and ask how they can offer concrete, task-oriented support. Through support work relationships and trust develop.

Wang also stressed the importance of accountability. Accountability is the cornerstone of meaningful solidarity work. The history of white activists undermining social change work alongside the contemporary manifestations of white privilege lead many organizers of color to be leery about working with white activists. This is further complicated by the tendency of white activists to either not see struggles in communities of color or to see them as very one dimensional, single issue, reformist struggles. Accountability, for white activists, involves keeping that history and these dynamics in mind and working to change this behavior. Accountability is doing what you say you're going to do. Accountability is being willing to be held responsible by the people that you work with for your behavior, actions and organizing.

Creating accountability often necessitates building relationships between organizations. San Francisco Food Not Bombs wanted to show solidarity with the mostly Latino day laborers in the Mission District. They would bring food out to the street corners where folks stand hoping to get work. FNB shared free food every Monday, but the group was unable to resolve questions around method and impact that arose from problematic dynamics in the unsolicited distribution to scattered individuals. In addition to the ineffective timing of sharing hot food at noon, many of the day laborers assumed that FNB was a church group, and communication was inconsistent. FNB decided to shift strategies and experiment with a different way of supporting these communities, by offering to bring food to events organized by the Day Laborer Program (DLP), an independent, self-organized center providing everything from medical services to women's group meetings. At first, the DLP agreed to FNB's offers to bring food, but would make sure that there was enough food in case FNB didn't show up.

Frustration at feeling redundant helped folks from Food Not Bombs develop their understanding of relationship building as a slow process of demonstrating reliability, leading to the growth of mutual trust. As more and more events went by and FNB showed commitment to follow through and work respectfully together, the DLP started contacting them to do food, including at important events like holiday meals for day laborers and their families. FNB has also helped coordinate child care for DLP meetings and door knocked to solicit neighborhood support in establishing a permanent building for the program. Over time, relationships developed. And now, in this time of increased attacks on immigrant rights, FNB is counted on as an ally as DLP and other immigrant rights groups prepare to fight back. These kinds of relationships do not happen overnight, regardless of how good the intentions are.

"Having the opportunity to do support work for an organization like Day Labor is a great gift," said Clare Bayard, an organizer with FNB. "What we in FNB have learned from watching their brilliant and inspirational

radical organizers in action, both community organizing skills and invaluable information about the realities of how the global economy hits different communities here in San Francisco, has strengthened all the work that our organization is involved with around economic justice and human rights. Building alliances is slow work; the DLP had nothing to gain by taking FNB initially at our fresh-faced enthusiastic word. But the process of internal political education that has accompanied our decision to prioritize building that relationship, being patient and dedicating ourselves to being reliable and flexible, has enabled us to find a much more effective way to support the critical struggles of immigrants in San Francisco. These folks are leaders in the fight against global capitalism, and we need to find ways to work in solidarity with each other."

However, in times of increased repression, there are further complications for multiracial alliance building. Dan Berger works with a multiracial group in Florida which is part of the continental network Colours of Resistance. They planned an antiwar and antiracism panel to specifically address the ways that white supremacy is operating internationally and domestically. They asked a prominent radical Latino professor to speak. The professor gave them contact info for a radical white professor and said due to racist reaction he would prefer not to be high profile. Berger asked, "In times like these, what are the responsibilities of antiracist whites to both be critical of our privilege, while also utilizing it to speak out?" Many radicals of color have responded that white antiracists have a responsibility to speak up while always remembering how white supremacy silences others.

In Richmond, Virginia, Sasha Vodnik and Shawn O'Hern talked about alliance building work they've been part of. "Food Not Bombs has been working with Parents for Life and Stop Police Abuse Now, two groups organizing in Richmond's African American community and led by people of color, for about six months. We irregularly attend each other's meetings, but have consistently turned out for each other's events over that time. FNB and SPAN co-hosted a lecture by Lorenzo Komboa Ervin (a former Black Panther and former political prisoner) a few months ago. We turned

out a crowd of about 50 people for three speakers." Vodnik said that one aspect of solidarity work is hearing how different communities define the issues. At the lecture, Lorenzo Komboa Ervin talked about opposition to the war animated by a broader vision of radical social change. "We aren't interested in a peace that maintains the status quo.", Ervin said.

Vodnik said, "That's been an important check-in for me in remembering the relationships between struggles - that work against police brutality and racism and work for a living wage and universal health care, etc., not only has a place in an antiwar movement - the movements are integral to each other."

Continuing on that line of thought, Brooke Atherton of the Challenging White Supremacy Collective said that white activists need to understand what it means to respect the leadership of radical activists of color. "The people most negatively affected by the injustice, need to lead that struggle for social change," she explained. There is much confusion about what looking to this leadership means. It is neither about white people blindly following others or being uncritical of people of color. Furthermore, lots of white activists have said that looking to other people's leadership undermines their own leadership.

Atherton responds, "It's not about losing agency; it's about giving up the need to control everything. Some white people can feel that doing childcare or phone banking is not the best application of their skills, but through consistency in this kind of support work, white people can build relationships and develop trust with radical organizers of color and learn the vital importance of supporting organizing led by people of color in very concrete ways." She said that it can start with asking activists of color whom you respect, "How are you organizing in this time period and how can we support your efforts?" These steps are the basis for long term radical, multiracial movement building. In addition to antiracist solidarity work, there are also lots of white people who work in multiracial groups. The questions that arise are different, but the intentions are similar. Brooke reminds

us that white activists' leadership is continually needed in organizing with other white people. There are also important leadership roles that anti-racist white folks have played and continue to play in multiracial organizing.

In this time period, I have looked to inspiring people around me for guidance and wisdom. The conversations that developed into this essay have been a way for me to make, as feminist writer bell hooks says, "radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world." This strength is necessary because, as many of the organizers noted during our conversations, there aren't easy answers to these questions of effective political education, organizing in white communities and doing antiracist white solidarity work. Rather there are complicated questions to guide us.

This essay is dedicated to Katie Sierra, the 15 year old who was suspended from her high school in Charleston, West Virginia for expressing antiwar politics and trying to start an anarchist club. Her courage also guide us.

More resources:

- Katie Sierra and her legal battle at illegalvoices.org/katiesierra.
- United For a Fair Economy conducted a listening project talking with community organizers around the country about their work post-9/11. GlobalRoots.net.
- Colorlines, a magazine on race, culture and action, produced a special edition covering the war on terrorism highlighting the impact on communities of color in the US. 4096 Piedmont Avenue, PMB 319 Oakland, CA 94611 or colorlines@arc.org.

• The Center for Political Education and the Institute for MultiRacial Justice have created Q&A leaflets about the war on terrorism available at politicaleducation.org.

• Onward newspaper has produced a special edition on anarchist responses to the war and their new regular edition has important news and analysis from the antiglobal capitalism movement. POBox 2671 Gainesville, FL 32602 or onwardnewspaper.org, info@onwardnewspaper.org .

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This article as well as Elizabeth 'Betita' Martinez's will be available at the Colours of Resistance website
<<http://www.tao.ca/colours>***

*** Colours website address has changed.
Check for new listing.