

8th Pan-African Congress: Black Labor and Black Liberation

Abdul Alkalimat¹
Black Left Unity Network (USA)

Greetings, comrades and friends, brothers and sisters all:

I am honored to share some thoughts on Black labor and Black liberation in order to help open our 8th Pan-African Congress. Where else if not at 8PAC can we join a global process of rethinking Black liberation in the 21st century? We are living in a time of great global transformation and everyone needs to delink from the old experience of previous generations. Of course we learn from all that has preceded us, but we must dare to be in the now, in the revolutionary transformation of our economies, cultures, and the ways we do things in the everydayness of life in all of our societies. The Pan African Congress movement must continue on, and enable us to share our strategic visions and to implement global collaboration as we face our common global enemy.

African people in the US are mainly descendants of Africans captured as slaves and forced to work for the benefit of their captors. This is why we are here at this 8th Pan-African Congress as an African American delegation, to maintain a link with our common history of resistance in Africa and the African Diaspora since those terrible days of the European slave trade. We in the US are the African descendants who are the deepest probe into the West, deep into the life of what started out as a genocidal European settler colony and is now a global experiment for the future of humanity. People are in the US from all parts of the world, making their home in the midst of the greatest concentration of capitalist class exploitation, racist oppression and all other forms of domination including male supremacy and marginalization of the aged and those with health challenges. The US has more

¹ Editor of the Journal of the Black Left Unity Network (The Black Activist; <http://jblun.org/>) and Professor of African American Studies and Library and Information Science, University of Illinois (<http://www.lis.illinois.edu/people/faculty/mcworter>). Also the editor of several web based projects: Malcolm X (<http://www.brothermalcolm.net/>), eBlack Studies (<http://eblackstudies.org/>), Harold Washington (<http://eblackchicago.org/HAROLD/>), and St Clair Drake (<http://www.stclairdrake.net/>). Also editor of the largest listserv in Black Studies, H-Afro-Am (<http://www.h-net.org/~afro-am/>)

people in prison relative to its population size than any other country in the world and nearly half of these people are Black.

We urge you to learn from our experience and not fall victim to the illusion of US democracy leading the so called "free world." In a word, don't fall for the illusion that the first African American president Barack Obama makes the US any different than it has always been. As I will make clear, Obama has not made things better. If anything, the conditions that we face (and you face all over the world) are worse! He has fallen way short of our expectations. But he has lived up to the expectations of the bankers with his billion dollar bailout, of the military with his policy of permanent war (although he declared the invasion of Libya was not a war) and his spy agencies like the NSA implementing an end to global privacy.

The general historical context we are living in is a global technological revolution. This revolution is being carried out so as to benefit the global 1% of super-rich banks and corporations. The fundamental contradiction is the great polarity in all our societies between the rich and the poor. Many of the national liberation movements in Africa and the civil rights movement in the US have vaulted a few Black people into the higher capitalist classes. But this has usually been at the cost of their delinking from the masses of Black people and adopting the neo-liberal policies of the World Bank and the IMF. Our broad movement served those few, but they abandoned us. We must press on. They can no longer lead or define the path for Black liberation.

My argument is that the fundamental basis for Black liberation is a class question. Only when Black workers and the masses of our people, marginalized in dire conditions of poverty, can transform society and create equitable condition^s for all can we begin to achieve Black liberation. Today I will describe the exploitation and impoverishment of the Black masses in the US. On this basis we can begin to think about rebuilding the US Black liberation movement in the 21st century and the global Pan-African movement for world revolution. ✓

Historical Periodization of Black Labor

By way of introduction, let's consider the role of Black labor over the history of the US. There have been three main stages in this historical experience, each adding a new systemic experience. First there was the full employment of slavery.

After the Civil War that ended slavery, Black people joined the employed with ever-present unemployment due to the cyclical crises of industrial capitalism and complicated by the pervasive structures of racist employment practices. Finally, for several decades now Black people have started to be delinked from work, permanently unemployed, due to the technological revolution guided by neo-liberal policies. At every previous stage of US history, Black labor was at the center of accumulation on which the rulers of the US stand. Now as Black labor is thrown aside, we face the dangers of the genocidal conditions that stalk the Black masses in both urban and rural communities that are being torn asunder.

The origin of this is the European slave trade. [Slavery was a labor system for the maximum use of African labor. Joined with technological innovation, Black labor drove the US economy, especially with the production of cotton. The mechanical cotton gin increased productivity in a very dramatic way. When cleaning the cotton entirely by hand, it took one slave a complete day to clean one pound of cotton. Later with the hand-powered cotton gin, one slave could clean 150 pounds per day. Even later with the steam-powered gin, one slave could clean 1000 pounds per day.

Fueled by this ever-more-productive labor, the economy exploded. In 1790, the US produced 6,000 bales of cotton. In 1810 this was up to 178,000 bales of cotton. By 1860 slaves produced four million bales of cotton. Put another way, in 1820 cotton was more than 50% of all US exports and by 1825 US-produced cotton was 80% of the world's commercial supply. Cotton had become King. Between 1830 and 1860 more money was invested in land and slaves for cotton production than all the rest of the entire US economy put together! In 1790 there were 700,000 slaves and by 1860 there were 4 million, of whom more than 70% toiled in cotton production.

This economic condition did not entirely end with the Civil War in the 19th century. It was finally ended in the mid-20th century with another technological innovation, the mechanical cotton picker. As the mechanical picker came to the cotton fields, the sharecroppers were literally driven off the land in the Great Migration of Black people out of the rural South into the urban industrial North. From 1910 to 1970, more than six and a half million Black people migrated from the South. Five million left after 1940 as the mechanical picker came in. Thereafter, only half of the Black community was in the South, and only 25%

remained rural. Everything began to change. The historical mass Black experience of rural labor, under slavery and sharecropping, was bracketed by two technological innovations: it began with the cotton gin in 1790¹⁵ and ended with the mechanical cotton picker in 1942.

In sum, 1790 to 1942 saw increases in production through stages of elimination of rural human labor. Then job elimination happened in industry. In 1913 Henry Ford had introduced the assembly line for making cars. This led to a great demand for labor in the factory system. When he hired Black workers at \$5 a day this was a big increase from the starvation wages people had gotten picking cotton. But several decades later, digital technology combined with the profit motive led to robots making cars and the city of Detroit in ruins. At its peak in the 1930s Ford's River Rouge plant in Detroit employed over 100,000 workers; today 6,000 workers work there. Across the US, Black factory workers live in conditions of permanent unemployment. If they have unemployment checks and social welfare support, even that is being taken away.

The fundamental role of Black labor has been to produce and circulate commodities, processes that are at the heart of every capitalist economy. Black people have mainly been workers, a fundamental part of the global proletariat. The current technological transformation of the economy and social life in general is eliminating jobs. Black workers in the US are now under attack in this technological environment. This impacts the young and the old. If you are still at work, you face longer hours, lower wages, layoffs, and disappearing health benefits and sick leave.

Current Conditions

This brings us to the current conditions. The data here covers the years of Barack Obama, who took office in January 2009.

Consider wealth: The US is dominated by a superrich capitalist class. The top 1% own 38% of the wealth. The bottom 60% own 2.3% of the wealth. One family, the Walton family who own Walmart, owns more than the bottom 40% of the US population. (Walmart operates today in 27 countries, including South Africa.) In this polarized context, the total US median wealth for white families is \$97,000 and for African Americans it is \$4,900. (Figures as of 2010)

Now consider jobs: Since Obama came into office, more than 600,000 public-sector jobs have been lost. This has long been the sector employing more Black people at the highest wages, so those lost jobs hit Black middle-income workers hard. Black unemployment continues to be about twice that of the total population, and is especially acute for Black youth where in some cities Black youth are over 50% unemployed. Over half of the Black unemployed were out of work for more than six months. Black workers in all regions of the country are more unionized than their portion of the entire work force, especially in large metropolitan areas and in the South.

Let's look at income: Since 2008, 95% of new income has gone to the top 1% of income earners. US household income declined from 2007 to 2010, by 5.4% for whites and by 10.1% for Blacks. Black family income was 63.5% of whites in 2000 but declined to 61% by 2010.

Now think of the family: Currently fewer than 1 in 5 Black households include two parents. So by and large mothers and grandmothers—or state agencies—are raising Black children. Since 1960, the percent of African American women who are married has dropped from 51% to 29%.

We live in poverty: More than half (52%) of female-headed households with children under 5 years of age live at or below the official poverty line. This includes 46.5 million Americans, 7% of all white people, 25% of all Black people, 40% of all Black children.

✓ Our health place^s us at risk: 38% of Black men and 54% of Black women are classified as obese. Black people experience two or three times white people's rates of illness of the heart, stroke, cancer, asthma, influenza, pneumonia, diabetes, HIV/AIDS and homicide. Further, 20% have no health insurance.

Out of work, we are sent to prison: One in fifteen Black men are in prison. Over the course of a lifetime, one-third of Black men will spend time there. When confronted by the police, Black people are four times more likely to have the police use force. Every 28 hours, a Black person in the US is killed by police or some kind of security force. The typical inner-city urban Black community faces police occupation, and most Black youth are stopped and harassed frequently and so develop their so-called criminal record.

In poverty we face homelessness: Black people are seven times more likely to be homeless than whites. One out of 141 Black people are homeless. And 56% of homeless veterans are Black.

Even in this land of plenty many of us go hungry: One in four African American households are food insecure and have trouble feeding themselves. Black people are three times more likely than whites to rely on food welfare programs. A total of 90% of African American children will receive government food assistance at some time before reaching the age of 20.

The US is not a utopia for Black people. Black people from the African Diaspora who migrate to the US come with high expectations, but they must remember that their children grow up as African Americans and face the conditions described in this paper.

Strategy for Black Liberation

Any strategic program for Black liberation requires that we think about class formations and the struggles that will realign the ^{se} classes in unity for Black liberation. This means to promote unity in action against a common enemy that represents the capitalist system and its police state. In opposition to the mass propaganda of racist capital, we have to assert that the majority of Black people are opposed to the capitalist system and in favor of socialism! The Pew Research Center reports that 51% of Black people view capitalism negatively and 55% view socialism positively. (<http://pewrsr.ch/tCcgoU>) As usual, the Black masses are ready for politics that the Black movement activists have for the most part not yet formulated and advanced as their ideological banner. This has to change. ✓

As indicated by the description of the current conditions, there are three terrains of struggle: the state, the economy, and the community. All of these are structural representations of racism, sexism and class oppression. During the hard segregationist period, racism was dominant and the Black middle classes played leading roles in the resistance. Now we have moved from *de jure* racist structures (by law) to *de facto* (in fact), and class differences have led to the geographical dispersion of the community into class-specific enclaves. Black liberation is primarily the mission of those most exploited and oppressed. They alone have it in

their interest to fight the capitalist system because they have no chance of any kind of reform agreement.

There are four critical class formations destined to be critical component parts of the fight for Black liberation.

1. **Small capital:** There are small businesses, farmers, and cooperatives that operate within the capitalist system but are in contradiction with big capital. For example, raising the minimum wage (\$7.50 per hour) to a livable wage (\$15 per hour) would not only raise millions out of poverty but would circulate the money through small capital and grow the economy. Further, giant monopolies like Walmart are driving small business into ruin and killing the local infrastructure of communities. Small capital can be predatory or utilitarian. Their relationship with the Black liberation movement will determine their direction of development.
2. **Professionals and students:** This wing of the Black middle class is undergoing its own form of proletarianization. Teachers are now in unions. Formerly small entrepreneurs, medical professionals work today for large hospital and health corporations. The same goes for lawyers. Students are being squeezed as higher education is leaving them behind and proving not to be a secure passage to a good job. Certainly members of this class formation have historically been an essential component of the freedom struggle. As these forces begin to fight in their own interests, the key will be the extent to which they align themselves with the working class and masses of poor people that make up the majority of the Black community. One historical example of this was the Black Panther Party's Serve the People programs. Stores contributed food for the free breakfast program and lawyers and doctors set up free clinics for the people. This kind of service for the people will be crucial in the coming period.
3. **Black workers and the temporary unemployed:** As previously stated workers are the base of the Black community. They are the majority and the heart of its social and cultural life. Here we can see many sectors of Black workers. At the base there are workers who work full time and still are listed as below the poverty line. Many of them work in the fast food industry or for

big retailers like Walmart. They are leading the fight for a livable wage of \$15. Next to this group are the temporary unemployed, people being laid off having long term unemployment compensation cut short. This creates desperate situations and heightens the social crisis of homelessness, health problems without insurance, hunger, drug abuse, and internal fratricidal violence within the community. Of course the majority of workers have the need to continue fighting for union organizations since without this self organization workers are at the mercy of the bosses. The orientation of the union faces a crisis in two major respects: Does it educate the workers against the capitalist system as well as organize the workers to fight for better contracts and higher wages and benefits? This includes employed workers fighting on behalf of unemployed workers. Does it organize the workers as a class force to fight for progress on all social and political questions outside of the workplace?

4. **The permanent unemployed:** This is a new formation that we have to understand. What is its role in history? As Fanon instructed, each generation has a mission that it must fulfill. This applies to each class formation. Can a class or class formation *in itself* become a class or class formation *for itself*? People cast aside by capitalism with no hope of ever having a stable job or a way to survive within the system will begin to discover that they have to fight to survive. They will not fight to save capitalism, making their quality of life contingent on someone being able to make a profit. They will fight for a new system in which the moral and political mandate for society is to care for all its members without capitalism's usual collateral damage. This is a new class in human history. It will become the bedrock for a Black revolutionary agenda. It is the wretched of the earth. It is the last that must become the first.

With these four class forces in mind, we can theorize how their convergence will rebuild a new phase of the Black liberation movement. The first and critical development is that each must first fight for their own interests and exhaust the possibilities of a reform deal with the system. Will higher education extend a new open admissions policy with supportive financial aid? Will workers be able to unionize and fight for a living wage and better working conditions? Will survival programs help to stabilize those who face permanent unemployment, including the

elderly? This is not the 1960s, when deals were made and the Kennedy-Johnson programs co-opted the social movements with reforms. This is neo-liberal austerity at its peak. The ruling elite is showing no mercy. It is in the struggle for these necessary developments that these class forces will begin to rediscover the need for broader national and even international movements for liberation and social transformation.

This is beginning to happen. The spontaneous movement is showing signs of real energy. One example is the response to the 2005 Katrina disaster, when the ruling elites implemented an ethnic cleansing program on the city of New Orleans. The refugees formed Peoples Assemblies and devised strategies to fight back. One of these led to a People's Assembly in Jackson, Mississippi that persisted and in 2013 elected a Black liberation fighter as mayor (Chokwe Lumumba of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement). The murder of a Black youth, Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012, sparked protests in several hundred cities united around the slogan, "No More Trayvons! Stop the War on Black America!" The masses of Black people are not taking their suffering lying down.

As part of this we have to make clear that we are in danger of a Great Forgetting as the generation of activists of the 1960s is passing or at least facing their own financial and health crises. Those of us who are still active face the task of rising above the historical polemics of the past, moving past old grudges and personal clashes to find new possibilities for unity. Remember the old slogan: Unity without uniformity. If we infect the youth with past sectarian battles, the fate of the future is sealed. Our task is to share the past from the perspective of the future, accepting the necessary criticism that must come if we are to move forward.

One such effort is the Black Left Unity Network. We are networking with organizations that have activists on the ground, immersed in fighting campaigns of the above mentioned class forces, especially workers and poor people in the Black community. Some come from the struggles in the socialist camp, variously supporting the Soviet Union, China, and/or Cuba. Some come from the nationalist camp, whether in culture, in the Black Belt south, or focusing on the African Diaspora. Some are new to the struggle and are representative of the emerging generation of activists. These kinds of realignments are at the heart of the

rebuilding the Black liberation movement in the US and the revolutionary Pan-African movement on a global level.

Comrades, Brothers and Sisters,

Forward to the work that must be done!

Amandla!

Venceremos!

Power to the people!

WEBLIOGRAPHY ON BLACK LABOR AND BLACK LIBERATION

1. The Black Activist: Journal of the Black Left Unity Network
<http://jblun.org/>
2. Black Left Unity Network
<http://www.blackleftunity.org/>
3. Black Workers for Justice
<http://blackworkersforjustice.org/>
4. Southern Workers Assembly
<http://southernworker.org/>
5. Black Agenda Report
<http://www.blackagendareport.com/>
6. Black Commentator
<http://www.blackcommentator2.com/>
7. Southern Poverty Law Center
<http://www.splcenter.org/>
8. Mississippi Workers Center for Human Rights
<http://www.msworkers.org/>
9. US Human Rights Network
<http://www.ushrnetwork.org/>
10. Defenders for Freedom, Justice, and Equality
<http://www.defendersfje.org/>
11. Malcolm X Grassroots Movement
<http://mxgm.org/>

12. Project South
<http://www.projectsouth.org/>
13. Coalition of Black Trade Unionists
<http://www.cbtu.org/>
14. Monthly Black Worker Report
<http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/blackworkers/report.php>
15. People Organized for Progress
<http://njpop.org/wordpress/>
16. Organization for Black Struggle
<http://obs-onthemove.org/>
17. Revolution
<http://revcom.us/revolution/index.html>
18. League of Revolutionaries for a New America
<http://www.lrna.org/>
19. Network for Revolutionary Change
<http://www.networkforrevolutionarychange.org/national/>
20. Workers World
<http://www.workers.org/>
21. Coalition of Labor Union Women
<http://www.cluw.org/>
22. Jobs with Justice
<http://www.jwj.org/>
23. Labor Notes
<http://labornotes.org/>