

Building Pan-African Solidarity

Political Education and Projects of Self-Determination



By karen marshall
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Early in my life, I was introduced to Caribbean authors and organizers. I learned about Walter Rodney and discovered I knew people who participated in the Rodney riots in Jamaica. My introduction to politics was through learning Caribbean revolutions, African independence movements and generally issues that grew out of colonization and dispossession.

As I got older I discovered the writings of Claudia Jones, Stuart Hall, and Aime Cesaire—all of who sharpened my analysis. I think of myself as a Pan-African Socialist, rooted in the traditions of Franz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Kwame Nkrumah, and Maurice Bishop.

In the US, organizers and revolutionaries like Ella Baker, Malcolm X, Kwame Ture, and James Boggs influenced me. In my late teens and early twenties I was drawn to studying SNCC because of their explicit grounding in Black Power and also because of my deep respect for Kwame Ture and

Ella Baker. Like many Black people my age at the time I was absolutely drawn to Malcolm because of his emphasis on self-determination. And I found myself drawn to the formations that were heavily influenced by Malcolm and SNCC. So I organized alongside friends who themselves were in formations like the AAPRP and [Malcolm X Grassroots Movement](#).



Building Dual Power: Projects of Self-Determination

In 2013 I joined Rethink New Orleans. Our primary goal is to train Black working class young people to be revolutionary organizers. Political education—which includes a lot of study—is a huge part of that training. We think of youth organizing as a young person who organizes; but they don't only have to organize young people. We want them to have a clear analysis of the current system we live under and what it actually is going to take to win and who they need to organize in order to win. We're trying to develop a politically conscious Black poor and working class base in New Orleans to build our own power.

This essay was produced in collaboration with the People's Think Tank (PTT). Researchers from PTT interviewed organizers (such as the author of this piece) and worked with them to create these essays. We believe that these essays offer important lessons for movement builders seeking to pursue intersectional organizing, connect communities and movements, build solidarity, and achieve education justice. The views expressed in these essays are the author's and not necessarily those of the People's Think Tank.

Our priority is to build a space where folks are really down to do some deep relationship building, some deep political consciousness-raising through practice and study, and some projects of self-determination that potentially will build the mass power to challenge current institutional systems. Our hypothesis is that once we get to a particular mass base, we'll have the kind of power that can push policy in a different way. As it currently stands, we don't have the power to push and sustain a particular policy within the larger state apparatus, which is not designed to support us.

We want folks to know and experience what it is they're trying to organize towards. What does it feel like to be taught about capitalism and socialism in the larger context of the world? What does it mean to be taught about countries like Cuba and what they're able to do and what they provide? What does it mean to learn these things so that you actually know what you're fighting for? We're learning how to govern so that when we actually develop the mass-based power to take over, we're experienced enough to be able to do those things and it won't crumble in our hands. But people have to actually step up and have a lot of discipline; they have to study and experience the practice of governing regularly, making collective decisions. People have to come to realize, "This is what we mean by a liberatory education; it's not some social justice course that I took at Loyola University that shapes my understanding."

It's very easy in the youth organizing space to get lulled into having a hyper-local lens and a hyper-specific lens that doesn't connect to what's happening to exploited people around the nation and around the globe. Rethink should be connected to a larger network to foster an understanding of what it means for us to try to win nationally and

internationally. We only have a small chance of winning if our organizing is not connected to larger strategies that folks are trying to move.

Intersectionality and Triple Oppression

I appreciate Kimberlé Crenshaw's analysis of intersectionality, but for many reasons I don't think of it as a suitable framework when it comes to organizing. It was originally conceptualized by Crenshaw to allow Black women to be understood

dynamically within the space of discrimination law. Over time the term "intersectionality" became widely understood as a way to recognize intersecting identities. And now intersectionality is often wrongly interpreted as voice—as in, "these people need to have a

voice." It has become a social justice version of representation politics which is hyper individualistic. People are encouraged to list all their identities. You might hear someone say "I'm an immigrant Black woman who is first generation and working class, and because of that, I should get the opportunity to speak here." Yes, folks who are super exploited need to have a voice; but there can't be an assumption that just because you have a confluence of particular identities that puts you in many different target groups, that you will give voice to any particular analysis of your situation that's anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, trying to free the world versus trying to get resources for yourself. I'm not saying you shouldn't get the opportunity to speak, but that doesn't mean that what you say will have a political analysis that points towards liberation.

I lean more towards Claudia Jones who is probably most well known for her article "[An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman.](#)" In that article she wrote about the concept of *triple oppression* as a way of understanding and



connecting the struggles faced by African women across the diaspora as a result of race, gender and class. This lens helps us understand that freedom or liberation can only come from dismantling the structures of oppression which is different from the way people sometimes express intersectionality as like, "Here's the way I see myself." I'm not saying the way I see myself isn't important; but the structures shape my experience, and my goal isn't to get the existing structure to include my identities. My goal is to eradicate the oppressive structure.



At Rethink, we talk about what it means to be Black as a political understanding, not as an aesthetic. The US definitely commodifies whatever Black is as an aesthetic; but there's a political and social meaning to being Black under racial capitalism. So what does that mean? How are you purposely coded by a structure designed to oppress and extract, and how does the way that you're coded shape your access to resources or all the layers of exploitation that you experience? We're specifically organizing Black poor and working-class youth in New Orleans. It's not because there's an inherent specialness to Blackness that Black people are going to be the best organizers, and it's not a specialness to youth that youth are going to be the best organizers. It comes from an analysis that under this current stage of capitalism, particularly in New Orleans as the political economy plays itself out, Black youth are one of the most exploited layers of the working

class. So we organize poor, working class Black youth because, as the most exploited layer, they potentially have the greatest capacity to organize other layers of the working class to be able to win.

Our approach is more like, "We have an analysis of what happens in the city. In this city, the overwhelming large majority of poor people are Black. The overwhelming, large majority of the super exploited are Black, of the incarcerated are Black, and many of them are youth." And there's a reason for that. Let's uncover the reasons as we uncover how the political economy in New Orleans works, how capitalism particularly unfolds in this space, and the role that New Orleans plays in the larger national social imagination and political economy. Let's organize from that standpoint.

Solidarity: It's Not Even a Question

That's why I lean towards Claudia Jones' analysis of triple oppression, because there's an acknowledgement of how the larger structure works and the layers of exploitation under the larger structure.

This kind of analysis lends itself more to solidarity. Black people in the United States function as an internal colony, so the same way the West and the US have colonized other places, they exploit Black people in the United States as an internal colony. From there we can see that the structure does the same thing to us as to Palestine, and our experience of it puts us in solidarity. That kind of analysis says, "Okay, Israel is occupying Gaza and committing mass genocide, trying to steal land. Therefore, it is our responsibility to be in solidarity." If we call ourselves organizers or revolutionaries, we must be in solidarity. It's not even really a question.

Back in the day a clear analysis like this allowed folks to support the Vietnamese Communists fighting for liberation and to support the Cuban Revolution. This is why we need to support Haiti now. It helps us make the connection between the Sahel, Haiti, Palestine, and Sudan.

The only way to make that connection is to have a clear understanding of how this horrible, dehumanizing global imperial structure sees and wants to exploit me the same way as these other peoples.

The next thing is what is the best way to be in solidarity? What is our capacity? What do they need us to do? What is possible within the conditions here? What are the tactics to use in New Orleans that are part of a larger strategy that makes space for more liberation in Palestine or more liberation in Haiti? We're tied together, so we have to move in that way. That's how I think of solidarity.

We can't just appeal to the good intentions of people in the power structure. It's not like if we give statistics about how many people are homeless, folks in government are going to be like, "Damn, we didn't even know all that. You're right, we should build houses." The purpose of statistics is to bring more people to our side, to organize more of our people.

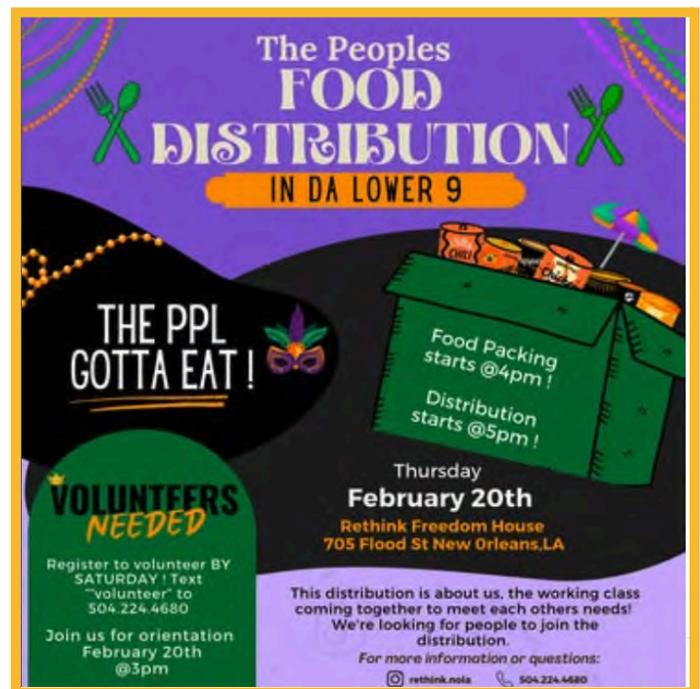
So when we place solidarity demands here, we need an "or-else," or a consequence. In order to have an "or-else," you have to build the skill, the discipline, the analysis, and the capacity to carry it through.

A clear analysis helps us understand how to build solidarity with white folks too. Take Louisiana as an example. Poor folks in southeast Louisiana and in some of the whitest parishes are hella exploited. How do I engage so that there's a clarity around political consciousness? What are the ways that I am forced to be in solidarity with these folks because we need to dismantle the same structures?

We emphasize the structural conditions, not so much the personal. I don't care if a white person doesn't know much about Black people or says something that's not cool. But structurally, white people tend to dominate, even in coalitions that claim to be diverse. The leadership is often very

white. I don't mean just the formal leadership; the informal leadership of folks that get to push the agenda tends to be overwhelmingly white. And that's structural to me and has to be challenged.

We need to have a clear study of capitalistic tactics so that we can counter them. Maybe one of the things I could do to be in solidarity with folks in Jackson, Mississippi, or Appalachia where water is cut off or poisoned, is to develop a cadre of folks who develop an analysis and can act on it. I mean cadre in the true political sense of a cadre, people that are like, "Yo, this is what the United States does externally in terms of sanctions, so obviously they'll do it internally to us, cut off all our resources." Then we can start to use our engineering genius to figure out how to purify water and share it with our comrades in Eastern Kentucky or on a reservation in Jackson. That's following the leadership of Cuba, that's following the leadership of Venezuela. When the US sanctions everything and won't let them have access to medicine, how did they come up with vaccines during COVID? How does Cuba send doctors all around the world when it's one of the most heavily sanctioned countries? We have to study and learn from those things.



Building Solidarity to Challenge Issue-Siloing

When there's no third party or leftwing political party, issue-based organizing becomes siloed in its own strategies and remains separate from other people's strategies. Education justice is siloed from abolitionism. Even within education justice, conflicts emerge. Teachers pursuing education justice versus parents organizing for education justice versus young people organizing for education justice. There are contradictions that don't need to be antagonistic. Each small entity is working off its own strategy and there's not a larger understanding of how we could all move together.

Historically in the United States, the American Indian Movement and the Black Liberation Movement, particularly organizers in the Black Panther Party and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), made incredible shows of solidarity. For example, the same formation that was able to free Assata Shakur from prison supported freeing Leonard Peltier from prison too. More recently, there were incredible shows of support resisting the oil pipeline at Standing Rock and in the widespread uprisings in response to the murder of George Floyd.

Solidarity also needs to have a practical material grounding and not just thoughts and prayers, like "I'm sending healing thoughts." We have to ask, "What do you need?" It has to be a shared process of thinking through an analysis, so

we can get to the place to say, "All right, now that I know what you need, we have to build the skills to support you that way. Here's what we can do immediately, but here are the skills and the techniques that we have to build for real to get down with you."

For example, at one point we were trying to figure out what sanctuary for undocumented folks looks like. How can Black and Brown students build out a sanctuary strategy? As a start we brought a lot of young people to New Orleans with the support of the Alliance for Educational Justice, and we held a Young People's Movement Assembly. We organized an interactive game that we called Sanctuary Tag. We had bases around the room, and we asked people, "What needs to exist structurally for you to feel safe? What is a strategy that actually creates safety for all of us in this room, given the way the system codes us differently?" We came up with five things, including deportation defense, that became our youth sanctuary strategy.



That was our way of trying to build out long-term solidarity. We decided to train Rethinkers in deportation defense so that, if young undocumented people that do work on the border come through to New Orleans and ICE is rolling through, they don't have to be like, "Damn, we are on our own with this one." We can actually, for real, be in solidarity with them. That's a long-term project of making sure we got the skills down to do that.

Political Analysis, Self-Determination, and Liberation

This country has blood on its hands. The US is never going to stop incarcerating and murdering Black people because we tell them how many Black people they've incarcerated and murdered. It's just never going to happen. They do that on purpose. We're rounded up on purpose. We're murdered on purpose. People are starved on purpose. People are homeless on purpose. We have to educate our people in order to build the power base to force change.

We start with political analysis because it allows you to situate your own experience in the larger structural systems of oppression. Lack of political clarity is too often the obstacle to solidarity, and that's a result of the propaganda constantly pushed out by the dominant systems. Political analysis helps people see that even though exploitation affects them somewhat differently than it affects other people, the underlying structure is the same. That understanding puts you in the beginning stage of being in solidarity. That's why I say it's an ideological struggle.

This kind of political analysis is critical to our liberation. At Rethink we ground self-determination in political education. We are fighting for self-determination for poor Black working class people because we believe that will lead to liberation for all poor and oppressed people in New Orleans and beyond. ❖

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The graphic features a black and white photograph of a crowd of people at a protest or rally. Overlaid on the image is the word "Rethink" in a large, white, sans-serif font. Below it, in a smaller, yellow, sans-serif font, is the text "FIVE POINTS OF LIBERATION". The graphic is divided into five horizontal sections, each with a numbered point and corresponding text. The background of the text boxes is a solid yellow color.

Rethink

FIVE POINTS OF LIBERATION

- 1.** corporate controlled **MEDIA** consistently creates narratives that dehumanize and demonize people of color, even when we are murdered, we are not safe from unfair and racist media coverage.

WE WANT CONTROL OF OUR OWN MEDIA OUTLETS THAT SPEAK TO OUR EXPERIENCES AND SOLUTIONS TO SYSTEMIC ISSUES

WE WANT AN END TO MASS MEDIA PRACTICES THAT PUSH NARRATIVES THAT DEHUMANIZE AND DEMONIZE US

WE WANT AN IMMEDIATE END TO THE MEDIA USING OUR CULTURE FOR THE ENTERTAINMENT OF OTHERS
- 2.** the current **EDUCATION** system has failed to allow space for youth of color to develop a critical analysis of the current economic, political, and cultural order; it has repeatedly failed to teach us our true history, our communities are not given space to learn/explore ways to better their economic reality.

WE WANT EDUCATION FOR ALL YOUTH THAT INCLUDES ANALYSIS OF SYSTEMS THE GOVERN SOCIETY TEACHES OUR TRUE HISTORY

WE WANT CONTEXTUALLY & CULTURALLY RELEVANT CURRICULUM.

WE WANT INPUT FROM YOUTH OF COLOR ON CURRICULUM & TEACHER TRAINING.

WE WANT EDUCATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT YOUTH ENTREPRENEURSHIP, YOUTH COOPERATIVES & ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES THAT SUPPORT THE COMMUNITIES WE CAME FROM.

WE WANT YOUTH AND COMMUNITY INPUT AND VETO POWER ON ALL DECISIONS REGARDING SCHOOL OPENINGS, CLONINGS, LEADERSHIP & LOCATIONS.
- 3.** youth of color are seen as criminals and treated as criminals by schools, media, and the **CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM** at a disproportionate rate; this treatment is rooted in white supremacy and is a direct result of youth and community voices being ignored and rendered powerless when major decisions are made.

WE WANT AN IMMEDIATE END TO INHUMANE PUNITIVE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE PRACTICES THAT FEED POOR YOUTH OF COLOR INTO THE SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE.

WE WANT REMOVAL OF ALL POLICE FROM SCHOOLS.

WE WANT RESTORATIVE TRUANCY POLICIES THAT SUPPORT FAMILIES AND YOUTH TO THRIVE.
- 4.** racism and corporate greed coming from big agriculture and **FOOD** companies are shortening the lives of people of color, as a result of food deserts, lack of access to our own food systems, and malnourishing school food, we don't see culturally competent food, real food, or fresh/healthy food in our diets.

WE WANT ACCESS TO FRESH, HEALTHY, CULTURALLY REFLECTIVE FOOD IN EVERY COMMUNITY.

WE WANT GARDENS IN EVERY SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY RUN BY COMMUNITY MEMBERS THAT GROW FOOD THAT REFLECTS THE CULTURES WE CAME FROM.
- 5.** the **HEALTH CARE** system is a for profit industry that disproportionately provides poor quality health care to youth of color in our own communities, too often our neighborhood clinics are understaffed, under resourced and lack provisions needed to aid the development of youth of color, equitable health care is a right.

WE WANT FREE HEALTH CARE THAT IS OF THE HIGHEST QUALITY, CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE, AND ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL YOUTH WHO ARE FORCED TO SUPPORT THEMSELVES - HEALTH CARE THAT AIDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF A HEALTHY HUMAN BEING.

WE WANT NEIGHBORHOOD CLINICS TO BE SUFFICIENTLY FINANCIALLY SUPPORTED TO CARE FOR THE COMMUNITIES THEY SERVE.

WWW.THERE THINKERS.ORG