

OPEN LETTER TO OUR AFRICAN AMERICAN SISTERS AND BROTHERS

Spring 2003

The letter was initiated by the Institute for MultiRacial Justice in San Francisco, California, cofounded in 1997 by Elizabeth Martinez (now its director) and Phil Hutchings (last Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC, and currently an Oakland, CA activist.)

Note: Peoples of color are being hurt more than ever today, thanks to the "Permanent War on Terrorism" and the War at Home. It therefore seems more important than ever to build alliances between our peoples who have similar struggles for liberation from poverty and racism, for peace with justice. This Open Letter is offered in that spirit.

The media have been full of it this year, with such headlines as "Hispanics Now Largest Minority," "America's Ethnic Shift"... "Latinos pass blacks unless you count black Latinos"... "Hispanics Pass Blacks..." As Latino/a teachers, activists, community people, students, artists and writers, we stand fiercely opposed to anyone making those numbers a reason to forget the unique historical experience of African Americans, the almost unimaginable inhumanity of slavery lasting centuries, the vast distance that remains on their long walk to freedom. We cannot let whatever meager attention has been given to the needs of Black people up to now be diminished by those new statistics.

In the Latino community we will combat the competitiveness that could feed on those headlines and blind some of our people to the truth of this society. We will combat the opportunism that is likely to intensify among Latino politicians and professionals. We celebrate the unique resistance by African Americans over the centuries, which has provided an inspiring example for our communities as shown by the Chicano movement of 1965-75. We affirm the absolute necessity of standing with you against racist oppression, exploitation and repression--the real axis of evil--and of supporting your demand for reparations.

Latinos who may find it hard to see beyond their own poverty, their own struggles against racism--which are indeed real--need to think about one simple truth. Only solidarity and alliances with others will create the strength needed to win justice.

Those newly announced statistics emphasize difference and pit brown against black like athletes racing against each other in the Oppression Olympics. But other numbers show how much we share the same problems of being denied a decent life, education, health care, all human rights. In times of war, look who fights and dies for the U.S. out of all proportion to our populations: Black and brown people.

To put it bluntly: we are both being screwed, so let's get it together!

History makes the message clear. It is worth recalling a major reason why George Washington--the invader who wasn't our Great White Father any more than yours--became president. He made a name for himself by successfully using the tactic of

Divide and Conquer against different native nations and tribes. Divide and Conquer, later Divide and Control, has sustained White Supremacy ever since. It will continue to do so unless we cry out a joint, unmistakable, thunderous NO.

That will not be easy. Our peoples have different histories and cultures, together with great ignorance about each other. Competition for scarce resources, from jobs to funding for university departments, can be real. Latinos do not always see how in a nation so deeply rooted in racism, they may have internalized the value system of white supremacy and white privilege.

As Latinos, we are committed to help build alliances against our common enemies. We oppose the divisiveness encouraged by statistics about who is more numerous than who. As activists, we urge our community to support Black struggles and to fight together at every opportunity for our peoples' liberation. As teachers, we work to educate Latinos about both Black and Brown history, and our past alliances. As men and women, we can never do too much to assert our common humanity across color lines.

Last, but hardly least, Latinos are a very diverse people with many different nationalities and histories. Latinos also have various roots,. In particular, we should recall that more Africans were brought to Mexico as slaves than the number of Spaniards who came, as can be seen by the all-African villages in Mexico today. The African in us demands proud recognition.

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