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THE BLACK SCHOLAR READERS FORUM ON IMMIGRATION

African Americans and Immigrants: Shall We Hang Together or Hang Separately?

by Gerald Lenoir and Nunu Kidane

THE BLACK SCHOLAR's Forum on Immigration in Volume 36, No. 1, ("Revolutionary Black Women's Activism") provided an excellent starting point for a serious discussion about how African Americans should approach the question of immigrant rights. Much of the discussion here expands upon the points made by the three Forum authors, Ron Walters, Jesse Jackson and Earl Ofari Hutchison.

Inspired by the upsurge in the immigrant rights movement in 2006, a group of African Americans and black immigrants in Oakland, California came together last April to form the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI). BAJI was founded to support the demands of the immigrant rights movement and to engage African Americans in a dialogue about the underlying issues of race and economic status that frame US immigration policy.

BAJI's main goal is to organize a core group of African Americans who are prepared to oppose racism in all of its forms. Specifically, BAJI supports: 1) a fair path to legalization and citizenship for undocumented immigrants; 2) no militarization of the US-Mexico border and no criminalization of undocumented workers immigrants or their families, friends and service providers; 3) due process, access to the courts and meaningful judicial review for immigrants; 4) no mass deportations, indefinite detentions or expansion of mandatory detentions of undocumented immigrants; 5) the strengthening and enforcement of labor law protections for all workers, native and foreign born; 6) no use of local or state government

agencies in the enforcement of immigration laws.

THE NUMBER OF IMMIGRANTS from the African continent has increased to record levels since 1990, largely due to US immigration policy changes in 1989 and partly due to the increased pressures of economic globalization driving more populations in sub-Saharan Africa to search for better opportunities.

According to the 2000 Census, there are approximately 1.8 million people in the United States that claim their birth in Africa, nearly 60 percent of whom arrived in the one decade between 1990 and 2000. This low figure is highly disputed by organizations that work with and represent these communities. Many of them put the figure at four to five million.

Despite being one of the most highly educated groups in the nation, African immigrants remain disconnected from civic engagement, and more importantly, remain divided from their black American counterparts on issues of race solidarity. In August, an immigration briefing was held for leaders of African immigrant communities in the San Francisco Bay Area, initiated by Priority Africa Network (PAN), BAJI and the National Network of Immigrant and Refugee Rights. It was evident from the discussion that many of the leaders assumed falsely that the ongoing immigration debates were about "the Mexicans crossing the border" and had nothing to do with them. Few immigrant rights groups had initiated contact with African immigrant communities

to engage them on the issues, to bring better understanding of the current debates, or to invite their participation and ensure their voices were heard.

THE MAJORITY OF AFRICAN AMERICANS are not aware of the large presence of African immigrant communities around them or the dramatic increases in major cities across this country (For example: Between 1990-2000, Atlanta has had a 284 percent increase, Minneapolis-St. Paul 628 percent). Even with the clear evidence of African restaurants, arts and crafts shops and hair braiders that spring up nearly every month, Africans as a community remain invisible and not integrated into the traditional black institutions, churches, schools and political organizations. When the word "immigrant" is used among all communities, the one image that is least considered is a black face of an African immigrant.

There is a long history of blatant discrimination against people of color attempting to migrate to the United States from Latin America, Africa, Haiti, China and other countries in favor of immigrants from Western Europe. Historically and today, these immigrants of color have been scapegoated for the economic ills of the country and have been subjected to exclusionary laws and racist violence.

African Americans have a good deal of ambivalence among on the issue of immigration. A public opinion poll conducted by the Pew Charitable Trusts in April 2006 found that a large majority of African Americans feel that immigrants are hard-working (79 percent) and have strong family values (77 percent). African Americans were more than twice as likely as whites (43 percent vs. 20 percent) to support undocumented immigrants receiving public benefits. Two-thirds of whites and 79 percent of African Americans said that the children of undocumented immigrants should be allowed to attend public schools.

However, more African Americans than whites say they or a family member have lost a job, or not gotten a job because an employer hired an immigrant (22 percent vs. 14 percent). And 34 percent of African Americans, as compared to 25 percent of whites, say that

immigrants take jobs from US citizens, rather than take jobs that US citizens don't want.

DESPITE THE CONCERNS of many African Americans, the high unemployment rate endemic in African American communities is not the consequence of immigration. Both black unemployment and mass migration to the United States have the same root cause: the worldwide phenomenon referred to as globalization. The number of migrants worldwide has doubled to over 200 million in the past 25 years, in large part due to displacement caused by profit-driven economic policies emanating from Washington and other western capitals, and genocidal wars.

Since the 1970s, globalization has meant the deindustrialization of the United States with union jobs in manufacturing fleeing to low wage countries in Latin America and Asia. More recently, it has meant the corporate outsourcing of jobs in high tech fields and other industries. In addition, employer discrimination against African Americans, white flight from inner cities and the concomitant deterioration of the tax base, and systematic public and private disinvestment in urban areas have meant the devastation of black communities across the country.

Meanwhile, the bilateral and multilateral international policies of the United States have forced migrants to risk their lives to come seeking a better life. The example that Rev. Jackson pointed out in his commentary, "Wage War on Poverty, Not Immigrants," is the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was ratified by the US Congress in 1996. Under NAFTA, Mexico was forced to open up its markets to subsidized food crops from the United States. The result, according the New York Times, is that 2.8 million farmers could not compete with cheap US commodities and lost their land and their livelihood. Many of them and their dependents have migrated to the US looking for employment.

THE US IS NOW ATTEMPTING to impose a Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) on countries in the region, a pact similar to NAFTA. The so-called free trade agreements are also being implemented in

or proposed for many countries in Africa, Asia, South America and the Caribbean.

The US has also used military policy and covert operations to support opposition groups and rebels fighting against legitimate governments. Nicaragua, Grenada and El Salvador in the 1980s and present day Haiti are cases in point. These actions have precipitated a flow of refugees from these countries. The current wave of African immigrants is supposedly arriving in increased numbers through their own free choice. But how voluntary is this migration when many are fleeing economic hardships, political instability, repression and conflict caused, at least in part, by US economic and political policies?

So African Americans and immigrants of color are pitted against each other, oftentimes fighting over low wage jobs, the proverbial crumbs on the table. This competition is a result of the normal operation of an unjust economic system.

THE BLACK ALLIANCE for Just Immigration offers another alternative. BAJI says that African Americans must join forces with immigrants to fight for economic and social justice for all people.

As Ron Walters stated in "A Respectful Black-Hispanic Coalition," Latinos are reenergizing the labor movement. Through unions like the Service Employers International Union (SEIU) and Unite Here, a hotel industry union, important gains are being made for working men and women in service industries. Walters stressed the need to join forces to promote workers' rights.

Unite Here Local 11 has set an important precedent for mutual struggle. In its latest settlement with the Beverly Hilton Hotel in Los Angeles, the 5,000-member, predominately Latino and immigrant union won a contract that obligates the hotel to increase wages, maintain an employee health plan, and hire more African Americans. This victory is a model for the union negotiations with twenty-five other Los Angeles hotels.

STEVEN PITTS, an economist at the UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education and a BAJI member, maintains that African Americans would benefit if

undocumented immigrants were granted legal status. He points to recent studies that provide evidence that legalization would improve wages and working conditions for both immigrant and non-immigrant workers.

However, Walters' call for stronger sanctions against employers for hiring undocumented workers is misplaced. Employers have used the specter of sanctions to threaten problem workers, i.e., those who try to assert their rights, with being turned over to immigration officials. As labor journalist David Bacon pointed out in a recent article, "Justice Deported," often the motivation for immigration raids on workplaces by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is to stop the momentum of immigrant workers who are organizing unions or asserting their rights. Employer sanctions foster a form of blatant racial discrimination in the workplace. Latinos and Asians are scrutinized closely, while white immigrants receive preferential treatment. In addition, the federal database used to verify Social Security numbers is severely flawed and subject to errors.

In his commentary Earl Ofari Hutchinson rightly decried the silence of many black politicians and civil rights activists on immigrant rights. African Americans have the moral responsibility to step up and demand that US immigration policy consider a human rights framework. The African American struggle for civil and economic rights has never been waged without allies. Likewise, the struggle of immigrants for recognition of their human rights cannot be won without friends and supporters. If they join together, the two movements can take giant strides toward victories now and for future generations. Social justice activists must build and sustain a new human rights movement that incorporates the burgeoning immigrant rights movement, the African American civil rights movement, and other social movements.

