



Essay: Black and Brown Unity

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BLACK AND BROWN UNITY

by Leonard McNeil

Black people and immigrants, particularly from Mexico, cannot afford to fall victim to the polarizing and false claim that the rights of one oppressed national minority are gained only at the expense of those of another. The chronic and disproportionate unemployment and under-employment affecting Black people is not caused by undocumented immigrants. Both the outsourcing of jobs to low-wage countries and the unauthorized migration by low-wage workers to the United States are the result of economic policies and practices that have nothing to do with the actual workers who take low-wage jobs. Achieving economic justice and racial equality for all requires that solidarity be forged and sustained between Black people and Mexican immigrants.

There is a historic legacy of solidarity between Mexicans and African-Americans that we can build on today. During the early 1800's, so many former slaves escaped into Mexico where slavery was outlawed that the federal government placed troops on the U.S.-Mexico border to stop the then "illegal" border crossing in the Southern direction. In 2008, National Guard troops and border patrol agents were placed and now remain at the same border to deter immigrants from Mexico from moving North and "illegally" entering the United States for economic opportunity and family unification. In 1829, Mexican President Vicente Guerrero, an African-Mexican, signed a decree that outlawed slavery in the Mexican Republic. Land titles were given to former slaves in Mexico, which courageously maintained its opposition to fugitive slave extradition. The defeat of the French as a confederate ally at Puebla, Mexico on May 5, 1862 (Cinco de Mayo) was a blow for the expansion of slavery. In several states in Mexico (Costa Chica, Veracruz, Guerrero, and Oaxaca), there are Mexicans with cultural (dance, food, music) and racial histories dating back hundreds of years to the African slave trade.

Both Black people and immigrants from Mexico have been subjected to negative stereotyping, discrimination, scapegoating, and exploitation.

For example, the unpaid labor of Black people in chattel slavery established the economic foundation necessary for the United States to become a global power. The exploited labor of undocumented workers from Mexico by U.S. agri-business has added untold wealth to the capitalist coffers. These common struggles and moments of solidarity will not by themselves turn contention into cooperation, but they do inform the larger political framework needed to develop principled unity.

Today, there are untold examples of cooperation between African-Americans and the Mexican Diaspora. For example, the Black Alliance for Just Immigration hosted a national tour of a Black delegation to the U.S.-Mexico border to investigate human rights abuses. The Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance and the Mississippi Workers' Center coalesced to help both Black and immigrant workers to enforce labor rights in the service and food-processing industries. In New Orleans, Black people put up the bail money for undocumented Mexicans who were jailed for protesting unfair treatment by employers. In the Midwest, a coalition of Black faith-based organizations initiated an organizing campaign to inform the Black community about the white nationalist origins of anti-immigrant groups. In Los Angeles, Black and Brown youth formed the African and Latino Youth Summit. The more that is learned about examples of unity and solidarity between Black people and the Mexican Diaspora, the more both constituencies will be motivated and encouraged to join together in common cause.



Leonard McNeil is Mayor of San Pablo and serves on the Steering Committee of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration.
www.blackalliance.org