

## REVISED

### Pre-convention bulletin #4 / December 21, 2014

for members only

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#### Contributing to the Pre-Convention Bulletins

This is the fourth pre-convention bulletin leading up to the ISO convention in February 2015. Contributions don't have to be long. They can consist of a report on a branch or district activity; an analysis of a local, national or international political development; a contribution on the ISO's current perspectives or an article on a theoretical/political topic such as how we understand neoliberalism or what approach to take on "privilege" politics. Please submit your contribution to [bulletin@internationalsocialist.org](mailto:bulletin@internationalsocialist.org).

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#### Black Lives Matter and the Birth of a New Movement

A movement has erupted against police brutality and has shaken the United States to its core. There have been daily protests in the weeks since two white police officers were not indicted for the murder of two unarmed Black men in Ferguson, Missouri, and Staten Island, New York. Since late November, tens of thousands of people in demonstrations, direct actions, and all manner of protests have rallied against the racism, brutality, and injustice that is the rot at the heart of all American legal institutions. The movement has placed the final nail in the post-racial coffin and along with it the delusion that the US has abandoned its racial past. The Black Lives Matter movement has put the political establishment on the defensive forcing the highest ranks of government to respond in word and promises of change. In the weeks since the movement exploded in the aftermath of a Missouri grand jury's failure to indict the white killer cop Darren Wilson, movement leaders from Ferguson have met with President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, Attorney General Eric Holder and Secretary Arne Duncan. Potential presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, after weeks of silence when Mike Brown was first murdered, uttered the phrase "Black Lives Matter" in a public appearance after the massive 12/13 protests. A handful of Black members of Congress interrupted a session with the "hands up, don't shoot" symbolic protest and a week later several hundred mostly Black Congressional aides walked off the job in protest. Black professional athletes have donned "I Can't Breathe" T-shirts, paving the way for college and high school boys and girls teams to wear the shirts as well. Thousands of professional, college, high school and even middle school students have organized and participated in die-ins, walkouts, marches and other forms of public protest. Students at seventy medical schools organized die-ins called "White Coats for Black Lives" in solidarity with the protests sweeping the country. In the days since the mass marches in New York City and Washington DC, public defenders and other lawyers have organized their own actions including the familiar tactic of the die-in.

The effects of this activism can already been seen in the shift of the widespread public discussion about racism, inequality and the justice system in this country. Indeed, in the weeks since the protests first began

polls show that the number of Americans who think there is a problem with racism in the country has leapt from 1 percent to 13 percent—the highest it has been since the LA Rebellion in 1992. Commissions, investigations and other inquiries into the machinery of Black murder at the hands of state agents are rapidly afoot. Obama, who has been reluctant, if not hostile, to discussing the persistence of racial inequality, all the while attacking Black communities for bad behavior and moral inaptitude, has changed the emphasis of his public comments. In an interview days after the 12/13 protest, the president and the first lady described their own encounters with racial slights and being mistaken as service people. Eric Holder, who earlier in his tenure described the US as a “nation of cowards” when it came to discussing race, has now concluded that, “we, as a nation have failed,” in “race relations”. These, of course, are innocuous comments that reduce racial injustice to the inconvenience of slights, prejudice and misunderstanding while ignoring the pervasive and institutional character of American racism that the vast majority of African Americans contend with. Nevertheless, in a country where racial inequality is rendered invisible by the stifling ideological cloak of the “culture of poverty” as the main lens through which disparities between Blacks and whites are interpreted, the shift in rhetoric at this early stage is not insignificant.

Where did the movement come from, what are its goals and how will it achieve them are important discussions to be had and discussed. Hopefully the preconvention period can take up these discussions, generalize some experiences and politically prepare the organization to continue to participate in the fullest way possible. This document, though long, is not exhaustive but is intended to help formulate a perspective for how to relate to the new movement.

### **The Roots of Ferguson**

Three years ago in 2011, the ISO undertook a perspective of “campaigning against racism” to re-affirm our understanding of racism as the central divide in the American working class and our political commitment to make anti-racist struggle a central feature of our organization’s work. Anti-racist organizing has always been a central feature of our organizing—from our anti-death penalty work, to fighting the Klan, to organizing around local cases of police brutality. But the lack of generalization in many of the disparate and local struggles made it difficult to sustain those various campaigns and projects across the organization. But even with the lack of sustained organizing, these struggles have been important to relate to in terms of how they consistently reveal the racist nature of American capitalism and bring together ordinary people and activists who want to confront it.

Before the US was post-racial, it was post-Civil Rights. Both descriptions were meant to communicate that the absence of racially unjust laws meant that the US was a ‘colorblind’ and meritocratic society. The structural inequality that was at the heart of the Kerner Commission in 1968 where “white institutions” were blamed for “condoning” racial segregation, substandard housing and police brutality was replaced by forty years of blaming African Americans for the conditions in their own communities. Periodically, there were political events that confounded the “personal responsibility” rhetoric and expose the depths of American racial injustice. The Los Angeles rebellion, sparked by another videotaped beating of a Black man, was the most dramatic example of this in 1992. By the end of the 1990s, there was growing momentum against racial profiling and the suspicion and targeting of Black men. The deadly effects of racial profiling became a national discussion when an unarmed Black immigrant, Amadou Diallo, was shot at 41 times by New York police and killed. The death of Diallo brought unprecedented attention to the practice of racial profiling and even prompted, then President Bill Clinton, to appoint a federal commission to investigate racial profiling. An emerging movement against corporate globalization and an insurgent Nader run for president in 2000 undergirded the rising tide of anti-racist activism. In the spring of 2001 a Black rebellion erupted in Cincinnati when police murdered an unarmed Black teenager who ran from police. For several days, Black youth fought police and destroyed millions of dollars worth of property.

The momentum for the anti-racist movement was dramatically cut short in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9-11. The US government rushed to turn tragedy into a call for national unity in preparation for a new war with Iraq. Moreover, federal agents justified racial profiling to hunt down Muslims and Arabs in the racist frenzy towards war. No longer was the tactic subject to federal investigation and lawsuits. It became a legitimate and widely supported tool in the “War on Terror.” For example in 1999, 59 percent of Americans said they believed that the police engaged in racial profiling and of those 81 percent thought the

practice was wrong. Even George W. Bush several months before 9-11 address a joint Congressional session on the practice to declare: "Racial profiling is wrong and we will end it in America." By September 30, 2001, Black support for racial profiling of Arabs had jumped to 60 percent compared to 45 percent for the rest of the population polled. By the end of October, Black support for racial profiling had leveled off to 34 percent. Not only was the developing struggle against racism buried under a wave of jingoism and Islamophobic racism, the focal point of the anti-racist struggle, racial profiling, was now championed as a necessary tool to protect the United States.

Over the course of the decade, though, the nationalism and the silencing of problems on the home front, there was an erosion of support for the war and a puncturing of the new silence regarding racial inequality in the US. The most prominent of these were Hurricane Katrina and the lack of response of the federal government as New Orleans and thousands of Black people in the city drowned. Shortly after Katrina struck, tens of thousands of mostly Black college students marched in the small town of Jena, Louisiana, to protest a racist attack on Black high school students there. The activism and mobilizations in response to events in Louisiana did not constitute the beginning of a movement but they did uncover the persistence of racial inequality in the US. The Bush wars and occupation had helped to close the space for protest or even articulating the continuation of inequality in the country, but Katrina exposed to the world that the US was still the same old racist empire and Jena helped to revive a marching and protesting tradition that had been decidedly muted since the attacks in 2001.

### **The Obama Generation**

The contradictions of the war and the collapse of the economy reduced the Bush presidency to a pile of rubble. Obama was elected in 2008 as the nation's first African American president by running a campaign that not only tapped into the disgust with Bush, economic crisis and endless war, but by rhetorically linking his presidential campaign as a continuation of the civil rights movement. His campaign slogans of "hope" and "change" raised the expectations of millions that the long, dark nightmare of the Bush years would finally be left behind. The expectations of African Americans were especially high as Blacks mobilized on an unprecedented scale to deliver Obama to the White House. Obama was a reluctant champion of African Americans even as a candidate and this would become more evident as the nation plunged deeper into his presidency. But the first glimpse of frustrated Black expectations under an Obama presidency came very quickly.

Weeks before the new president was even inaugurated, an armed transit cop on the platform of the Bay Area Rapid Transit murdered a twenty-two year old, unarmed Black man, Oscar Grant. Grant's murder was also captured on video and in front of dozens of witnesses. The anger in Black Oakland was palpable as hundreds and then thousands took to the streets to demand justice. It is possible that this kind of mobilization may have happened in any event, but the brutality of Grant's murder in the days before the nation's first Black president was to be inaugurated certainly added fuel to the disgust. Unlike in other cases preceding it and those that would come after, Grant's murderer would eventually and briefly go to jail for manslaughter. Despite this abbreviated sentence, the struggle for justice in Oscar Grant's murder brought a new layer of Blacks into struggle, helped to develop new organizing networks that extended beyond Oakland, and showed that protest could get a cop convicted for killing a Black man. These would all be important lessons and relationships moving forward.

By 2011 the shine from Obama's surprising electoral victory had begun to lose its luster. Black America was in the midst of an 'economic freefall' experiencing double digit unemployment, growing poverty and the devastating effects of the collapse of the housing market and with it the disappearance of Black wealth. The success of Barack Obama's campaign for the presidency had been met with ebullience but the reality was significantly underwhelming. Obama and his political minions, the Reverend Al Sharpton chief among them, insisted that the President did not need a 'Black agenda' and that African Americans would benefit from a policy agenda focused on a recovery for all. This refusal to create policies that would attack the structural inequality and racism that was responsible for the disproportionate impact on the crisis in Black neighborhoods was replaced by an ideological attack on Black communities that, in some ways, was led by the president himself. President Obama chastised African Americans for everything from feeding their children cold fried chicken for breakfast, to not caring about their education, to Black men fathering too many children out of wedlock. In other words, where no robust public policy would be on offer,

blaming Black communities for the outcomes of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression would apparently have to suffice. Even though Obama remained personally popular among African Americans, there were bitter limitations to having a Black president.

We have often argued that the periodically explosive character of American politics is, in part, because American workers have few formal outlets with which to register complaints about the system or to find temporary relief from its harshest edge. Instead, two political parties, beholden to capitalist interests that narrow the space for political reform where it exists at all, control politics in the US. This dynamic for African American workers and poor is exacerbated by the wide acceptance of African Americans being responsible for their own conditions because of bad behavior and bad choices. The unresponsiveness of the Black political elite has left even fewer avenues for Black expressions of discontent within formal political. This dynamic increases the likelihood of working-class, Black political expression to have an explosive element to it.

This was the context in 2011, when the protests to save the life of Georgia death row inmate Troy Davis, literally coincided with the emergent protests at the Occupy Wall St. encampment in New York City, and in the process, exploded the narrowing confines of American politics. The development of sustained protests near the end of 2011 seemed to be the awakening of the “American Spring” several months after the Arab Spring had electrified the world. In the US, the space to express political concern, anger or simply disappointment with the direction of government in the aftermath of Obama victory in 2008 narrowed even further with the rightwing victories in the 2010 midterm elections, the Davis and Occupy protests blew up the status quo, reaffirmed the legitimacy of street protests and radical politics. Moreover, their close proximity to each other identified the overlapping and, in fact, entangled relationship between racial and economic inequality. Occupy struggled to cohere a Black audience but, despite the difficulties, it was a desire of the movement to do so. But Occupy was still important because it brought to the fore the contradictions of the American road to economic recovery by highlighting unlimited government bailouts for private enterprise while millions of ordinary people wilted under the weight of unemployment, foreclosures and evictions. The Occupy movement popularized the reality of inequality in the US in a way that could not be contested. Even with limited Black participation, the focus on economic inequality helped to break open the space to discuss the conditions in Black communities. The emphasis on Black culture as an explanation for the deep crisis in Black communities made little sense in the broader context of gross economic inequality. This does not mean that those explanations withered away, but *other* explanations competed for space within the political vacuum. Moreover, the vicious attack and crackdown on the Occupy encampments over the winter and into the spring of 2012 broadened the parameters of understanding the repression and brutality of the police. The police, then, were not just a force of repression against African Americans, but they were the defenders of the status quo and they were operating at the behest of the 1 percent at the command of local, state and federal agents in coordinated attacks to destroy the Occupy movement.

This was the context that the mobilizations for the arrest of George Zimmerman developed. Weeks after newspaper articles described the situation involving the murder of Trayvon Martin, the story went “viral” and protests developed across the country to demand the arrest of Zimmerman. Thousands of people mobilized across the country with the largest demonstrations in Florida and New York City where groups had already been organizing in opposition to the racist Stop and Frisk policies of the NYPD. The protests of ordinary people filtered into the popular culture as Black athletes also registered protest at the failure to arrest Zimmerman. Importantly, the activism surrounding the case kept the story alive in the mainstream media including the publication of multiple articles interrogating the nation’s continuing crisis with racial inequality and injustice. The same thing had happened with Troy Davis’ case and together this created many months of public debates about the racial crisis in the United States. The activism around these cases as well as the intense public discussion they produced, along with the publication of Michelle Alexander’s wildly popular *The New Jim Crow*, helping to narrate the experience the dimensions of institutional racism in the lives of Black Americans. These events also generalized the experiences of Black people among other Black people and thus politicized the experiencing instead of simply casting them as tragic events. The eventual arrest of Zimmerman rehabilitated the efficacy of protests, marching and demonstrations that was necessary after the crushing of the Occupy encampments. Zimmerman would go onto be acquitted for

the murder of Trayvon Martin, reinforcing what Black America already knew to be true—the impossibility of a young Black man getting justice in an American court of law.

### **From Ferguson to the Future**

The previous sequence of these events is not about their chronological relationship to each other, rather it is intended to explain, in part, how and why Ferguson, and then the nation, combusted over the failure to indict the white officers who so publicly and audaciously murdered Black men in broad daylight and in front of many witness and suffered no consequence. Ferguson and New York were not just another chain in a sequence of events but they represented a qualitative escalation in the reaction to a growing crisis of police terror.

We anticipated the potential of sustained organizing around the issue of police brutality as early as 2012 when a number of cases gained attention and local campaigns, led by family members, were surfacing. Our discussions in 2011 on orienting sharply on anti-racist organizing helped us relate to these local anti-police brutality campaigns where they developed in our areas. But so did our organizing for years in the Campaign to End the Death Penalty and our absorption of the historical lessons learned from the Communist Party's work in the Scottsboro Boys Case and much of their anti-racist organizing during the Great Depression.

The immediate impact of our involvement in this work was twofold. One, it put us in a position to develop important relationships with family members that continue to be critical as this movement develops. For a core of members it provided important political training in this area of work that included organizing small committees and occasional protests, building political meetings, writing and publishing the stories of families who had suffered these losses and beyond. Much of this work culminated in the summer of 2012 when the Socialism 2012 conference featured a memorable panel of many family members. Two, it helped us further anticipate this aspect of racial inequality and injustice as a site of sustained organizing potential. In an article published in SW, titled “Terrorists in Blue” in 2012, we wrote:

There has never been a more urgent need to build a movement against racist, police terrorism in the United States. There is another reality to consider as well. If the police continue to kill Black men and women at will and with impunity, the possibility of the kinds of urban rebellions that shook American society in the 1960s is a distinct possibility. One must consider that this is *not* the 1960s, but it's the twenty-first century and there is a Black president and a Black Attorney General and people surely expect more. Moreover, the dynamic in just the last several days “near riots” have broken out in Southern California and Dallas, Texas as the police, growing more brazen in their disregard for Black and brown life, have executed young men in broad daylight, out in the open for all to see. In Dallas people watched as the police shot a man in the back as he ran away. Hundreds of people gathered in response as the Dallas Police Department deployed the SWAT team and riot police. There is a growing feeling of exhaustion with the vicious racism and brutality of cops across the country and the pervasive silence that shrouds it—and people are beginning to rise against it.

This brings us to Ferguson. Of course, no one would have anticipated that a small Missouri town on the outskirts of St. Louis would become the symbol and epicenter of ‘rising up’ against police terrorism in the United States. At the same time, it is easy to see why Ferguson exploded. Racist police, who not only harassed African Americans but also relied upon citing the Black public for a range of scofflaw and minor offenses to generate income for the town, had preyed upon the mostly Black town for years. The antagonism between a white, racist police force and the Black majority was literally institutionalized, as fines from tickets became the second leading source of revenue in Ferguson. When the police killed Mike Brown and left his body on the street for four and a half hours, it transformed this police killing into a lynching. In doing so, it, perhaps, signaled to Mike Brown's peers—those who would later take to the streets to protest his murder—an escalation in mistreatment by the police. In other words, if a cop is willing to shoot an unarmed teenager with his hands raised in the air, and his body in the street as a clear message, then they are literally willing to do anything to maintain their authority and control over the community. At that point there is no other choice but to fight or die.

The anger in Ferguson quickly ignited across Black America as protests and demonstrations across the country were organized in solidarity. But the outpouring of Black anger was not just in reaction to the murder of Mike Brown but the way in which it connected with the anger every Black person in the United States has experienced because of some brush or worse with the racism of the police and the entire criminal justice system. Moreover, the summer was punctuated with equally horrific cases of police murder that underlined their ubiquity in the country and highlighted the regularity with which police are never punished for the violence they mete out. Even in the days leading up to the decision involving Darren Wilson, a white officer in Cleveland gunned down the youngster, Tamir Rice, within seconds of arriving on the scene.

Young Black protestors in Ferguson were denounced as “violent” even while the militarized local police force mobilized tanks, tear gas, and other military grade weaponry to put down the Ferguson rebellion. The overwhelming response of the state and the heroic persistence of protestors in Ferguson made this an issue that would not go away and in doing so, it imposed on the public at large a discussion about racial inequality, injustice, the police and the criminal justice system that would have otherwise not taken shape. This debate has had two effects on broad politics. One is that it has forced onto the front pages of American newspapers substantive discussions about the material and structural dimensions of Black inequality. It is a continuation of discussions began in response to the activism around Davis and Martin in earlier years.

It has also shed light on the divisions that exists among African Americans. This has probably been one of the most important political developments in the movement. It was not only the media that raised the violence narrative as a distraction from the central issue of police terrorism directed at African Americans, but Black elected officials and the Reverend Al Sharpton also publicly warned against violence and went out of their way to separate protestors into different categories of good and bad. Sharpton sharply delineated between the two when he delivered the eulogy at Brown’s funeral. He said, “In a public rebuke of many of the young protestors who participated in the protests for Mike Brown, the Reverend Al Sharpton, at Brown’s funeral lectured, “And now we get to the 21st century, we get to where we've got some positions of power. And you decide it ain't black no more to be successful. Now, you want to be a ‘nigger’ and call your woman a ‘ho’. You've lost where you're coming from.” He went on to warn against partaking in any “ghetto pity parties.” The President called for calm and Eric Holder traveled to Ferguson to deliver the message personally.

Sharpton’s vitriol directed at the young protestors in Ferguson is not simply a debate about the strategy and tactics needed to take the movement forward. This public attack was his attempt to reassert control over the direction of the movement. Where Sharpton was most direct, other Black elected official attempted to hijack the anger around Ferguson and use it as a ‘get out the vote’ rallying cry. The Democrats were running several close and contested Congressional races and it was understood that their only chance was a Black voter mobilization. But very few, if any, of the Black elected officials outside of Ferguson and St. Louis had much, if anything, to say about Ferguson beyond voting. In fact, the Congressional Black Caucus, in the weeks prior to the murder of Eric Garner, decided not to vote with an amendment to stop the Pentagon program of giving local police forces the military hardware that would soon be dramatically displayed on the streets of Ferguson. Supporting the militarization of local police forces was only one problem with the CBC. Their relationship with several corporate magnates—from McDonald’s to Walmart and beyond—inevitably has had a conservatizing and demobilizing impact. Being involved in formal politics at the highest level requires regular solicitation of funds from corporations and the price of that ticket is the dramatic narrowing of political expectations and demands. The CBC has rarely been relevant in the lives of Black working class people and its relative silence or ineffectiveness around Ferguson simply confirmed this. But this ineffectiveness writ large meant that the working class youth at the heart of the rebellion understood that they would have to stay on the streets in order to keep their movement alive.

This proved critical to the sustenance of the movement when in November the grand jury delivered the predictable result of not indicting Darren Wilson. Activists anticipating this outcome had prepared for their own response and solidarity actions across the country. In the immediate aftermath of the decision, Ferguson went up in flames as the police abandoned the Black neighborhood of the area and allowed fires to burn through the night. This was fodder for the hysterical news coverage that focused on the supposed

violence of protests as the lens through which they would be covering the story. After a few days, the momentum of the protests began to wilt under the inevitable disappointment, fatigue and demoralization of the, now, state-approved murder of Mike Brown. But in the days after the decision another grand jury refused to indict another white officer involved in the murder of another unarmed Black man and father of six, Eric Garner. Where activism threatened to lag, the exoneration of another white cop gave new life to a new movement. On December 13 that new movement was realized when upwards of 100,000 people took to the streets in New York City and Washington DC to demand that “Black Lives Matter.”

### **Black Lives Matter**

The political conflict that began in Ferguson in debates over the character of the demonstrations have taken on more pointed political content. This was most sharply relayed at the 12/13 demonstrations. At the protest in Washington DC, led by Sharpton, it was conceived of as a tightly controlled event where Sharpton would display his relationship with the family members as evidence of his leadership and authority. It should be noted that Sharpton’s relationship to the families is built on two primary resources. One is his ability to provide financially for these struggling Black families by paying for funerals, promises of college tuition and probably financial resources beyond those. Second, he has the capacity to provide access to the highest levels of government. Reports show that Sharpton has visited the White House 61 times since Obama has been president. But these connections tend to come with a price. Sharpton calls all of the shots and dramatically limits the scope of the grievances to the procedures of policing. In fact, in Sharpton’s speech at the National Action Network march in DC, Sharpton downplayed ‘race’ as a factor, opting for vacuous statements like “This is not old versus young, black versus white...All human lives are important.” Black organizers from Ferguson attempted to speak at the march but were prevented by Sharpton’s team. When explaining this later, he said that at his march “revolutionary” or “provocative” speeches were not going to be allowed. In a self-serving article written days after the march, Sharpton outlined what he would view as a successful outcome of the movement:

In 10 or 25 years from now, it won’t matter who got the most publicity or the most applause at a rally. All that will matter is the fact that police across the country will know that if they use deadly force, they cannot depend on local friendly prosecutors to walk them through a grand jury with no risk of a fair investigation. All that will matter will be the implementation of a process where state attorney generals handle police-involved shooting deaths of unarmed civilians, rather than local prosecutors and grand juries. All that will matter will be the idea that young men and women of color can walk down the street or drive in their car without fearing for their lives from those hired to protect them.

The article demonstrated two things. One, that the sharpening divisions in a movement that he has singularly been at the head of for years, has his attention. That Sharpton felt compelled to politically intervene in the current debates over the direction of the movement is significant. But the content of his essay also betrayed the narrowness, conservatism, and limitations of his vision. He continued to downplay ‘racial inequality’ as a central organizing issue in the movement and he has basically confined victory to two or three reforms that do not even address the central issue at the heart of the misconduct and brutality in the nation’s legal institutions: criminalization, the War on Drugs, and the effects of mass incarceration. But Sharpton and the politicians for whom he works are not interested in upending the system, they are looking to dull the antagonisms so that business resumes as usual.

When contrasted to the statement produced by a group of Ferguson organizers, one recognizes the world of difference in the scope and goals of their conception of the movement. Their goals include linking the struggles against police violence to a much broader vision of social justice, including immigrant and trans rights and the support of the low-wage worker movement. They ended their statement, writing:

This is a movement of and for ALL Black lives— women, men, transgender and queer. We are made up of both youth AND elders aligned through the possibilities that new tactics and fresh strategies offer our movement. Some of us are new to this work, but many of us have been organizing for years. We came together in Mike Brown’s name, but our roots are also in the flooded streets of New Orleans and the bloodied BART stations of Oakland. We are connected

online and in the streets. We are decentralized, but coordinated. Most importantly, we are organized. Yet, we are likely not respectable negroes. We stand beside each other, not in front of one another. We do not cast any one of ours to the side in order to gain proximity to perceived power. Because, this is the only way we will win. We can't breathe. And we won't stop until Freedom.

The challenge will be transforming this sentiment into a living, breathing movement.

### **What is this new movement?**

Up until this point this new movement has largely sustained itself through informal means of communication and organizing. Networks of friends have put out calls for various demonstrations through Facebook and other means of social media publication. Two friends organized the December 13th protest in New York, where more than 50,000 people participated. There is no true center to this movement and that is the point for some of the organizers who describe it as “decentralized but coordinated.” Where coordination does exist, it has largely been organized through regular conference calls that initially were confined to the invited but have since been opened to whomever wants to participate, but still organized through Twitter and Facebook. The main participants in those calls have been members of many of the new organizations that have begun to form: Ferguson Action, Millennial Activists United, Black Lives Matter, Organization for Black Struggle, BYP100, Hands Up United, The Dream Defenders and Million Hoodies Movement for Justice to name a few. Some of these groups formed before the events in Ferguson and were created in the mobilizations that organized around the murder of Trayvon Martin, but they all represent new forces in the anti-racist movement.

What they also have in common is that at least some of them are community based organizations or non-government organizations (NGO) meaning that they have some paid staff and rely on grants and other sources of external funding as a means of operating. In some ways this has been positive because it has meant a stable layer of organizers were sustained through a period when whether or not protests would continue was an open question—like after the immediate surge of activism in around Brown's murder. But this informality will lead to larger questions in the future in terms of how the movement is organized, its democratic character, the processes of making decisions and accountability for the decisions that are taken. Those are not the tasks and responsibility of paid staffers, but they are the responsibility of the movement as a whole.

Those questions are on hold because a center for the movement has yet to be defined. That is not necessarily a physical location, but a space—virtual or physical—where the politics, strategies and tactics of the movement are discussed and debated among the widest group of people possible. In all likelihood there will be multiple centers of movement organizing, each with their own particular demands, cultures, debates and dynamics. Thus far there seem to be four or five clearly identifiable centers of organizing developing: Ferguson, the Bay Area, New York City, Boston, and Chicago based not only on the size and frequency of the demonstrations but also the self-identification and self selection of new leaders out of these local struggles. But the movement won't be confined to these locations and the movement itself is very fluid and people in every city are trying to figure out how to connect with, link up to and join this struggle.

### **The Next Steps**

As was the case in the Civil Rights Movement, the establishment, recognizing the strength and popularity of the movement, will attempt to redirect it in a more benign direction. It's not everyday that the President of the United States, flanked by his Vice President and the Attorney General, agree to meet with grassroots activists who weeks earlier were protecting themselves from tear gas attacks. According to the participants, Obama clearly told protestors that they should slow things down, be patient, and that change takes a long time. This is the unmistakable effect of the organizing, the movement and the determination of the people involved. But affirmation and sympathy are not a change in policies and do not constitute actual reform. For example, Obama left the meeting with the movement leaders from Ferguson with promises to spend \$263 million in basically toothless reforms, but when the \$1.1 trillion budget was passed by Congress weeks after the meeting the money Obama promised was missing.

The long term strength of the movement will be based in its ability to not only reach large numbers of people, but to integrate those people into the movement as leaders and organizers in their own localities. This includes ordinary people but also students, workers and unions as well. The potential growth of a Black student movement is also a likely outcome of Black Lives Matters but with different demands and different dynamics. Black students have mobilized by the thousands to protest, not only police brutality off campus, but also linking those grievances to the hostility they face on their campuses as well. The capaciousness of the slogan “Black Lives Matter” creates multiple fronts for organizing against the many manifestations of Black oppression.

There will be political polarization in the movement as more conservative forces work to reduce the movement to the lowest common denominator of punishing individual officers or making procedural changes in law enforcement. But the nature of Black oppression in the United States lends itself to a broad conceptualization of the movement. It is impossible to separate the brutality of the police and the injustice of the legal system from the poverty and underemployment in Black communities. One can already connect the disproportionate rates of arrests and imprisonment of African Americans as a central way that Blacks are criminalized. It’s impossible to imagine curbing police abuse without addressing the crisis of mass incarceration, the War on Drugs, and the economic pressures that keep African Americans that keep Black people vulnerable to the whims of law enforcement. These tensions will continue to be exacerbated as the destruction of the public sector, urban restructuring and gentrification and the limited prospects for work in private job market leaves millions of working class African Americans in a precarious state. The largest employer of African Americans today is Walmart as one example. In this context, aggressive policing has become an integral part of maintaining segregated neighborhood boundaries and preying upon economically marginal young Black men who have been forced into the underground economy. While some Democrats have voiced concern about police practices, they have also championed the policing policies that have prompted this crisis. Moreover, with the ongoing pressures trending towards austerity, further attrition of public services, and low wage work as the primary option, it is not clear what policy option will disrupt these dynamics. The movement’s ability to connect with organized labor will be critical in the coming months. The impulse towards “shutting it down” and “no business as usual” makes the movement predisposed to arguments and discussions about the central role of the working class and the power of the strike weapon. There already exists a consciousness about the relationship between Black poverty and unemployment, police terror and the criminal justice system. The existing solidarity between the low-wage worker mobilizations and BLM helps to demonstrate the connections between economic exploitation and racial oppression. One can imagine the transformation of this struggle as workers participated in workplace actions to demand an end to the racial violence of people and the prisons.

Instead, it is the movement that holds out the greatest hope for African Americans and the working class in general. The Black insurgency of the 1960s demonstrated its capacity to not only transform Black life in the United States but to affect all of American politics. The racism experienced by African Americans is usually hidden to the wider society, but when it is exposed, it gives lie to the entire ethos of American Democracy. It exposes the US for what it actually is: a depraved empire that relies on brutality, murder and exploitation to maintain riches and power for the 1 percent. The movement of Black people challenges the imagined inhumanity of Black people, thereby undermining the racist logic that holds American capitalism together. Even as polls show that white people continue to maintain faith in the police these, like all ideas, are fluid and not immutable. The key to transforming all reactionary ideas is engagement with political struggle and its disruption of dominant logic and “common sense”.

This broad conceptions of what “Black Lives Matter” opens up a range of political discussions and possibilities that raise the critical questions as to why Black life has not mattered under capitalism and in the United States and what is necessary to change or even transform that. In the 1960s, millions of young people who began the decade with a very limited, if not narrow, idea of what “freedom” meant changed over time and then drew very radical conclusions about the nature of US capitalism. After betrayals by the Democratic Party, a failure of the state to achieve even the most basic Black rights in the North, and the inconclusiveness of the achievements of civil rights legislation, tens of thousands of those activists became revolutionaries. There is no reason not to believe that the same process is underway and is perhaps even deeper at this stage of the movement’s development. Even in the tumult of the 1960s, there were still the last vestiges of the postwar economic expansion and available jobs. Today, the Obama Generation has

come of age in an unrelenting period of war, recession, and ever accumulating debt. They are part of a global youth rebellion that is rooted in the realization that they have no future except of economic hardship, climate destruction and general insecurity. There is no way out of this dim reality except through struggle and the transformation of the economy from one for the parasitic minority to one controlled by the working masses of the world. The failure of Occupy in its original incarnation underlined the limits of anger and the recognition of inequality as the only necessary ingredients for political radicalization and social change. The struggle also needs politics, commitment, solidarity, generalization, and organization.

**KT, for the steering committee**

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## **Campaigning against racism**

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Coming out of the fall National Committee meeting a decision was made to make anti-racist organizing, with a special emphasis on anti- Black racism, a centerpiece of our national perspectives. The reasons were based on three related factors. The first is that the economic crisis has been particularly devastating in African American communities with rising unemployment and foreclosures at its center.

Moreover, growing poverty has been met with continued brutal repression by the state in the form of police brutality, unfair prison sentences and attacks on social programs that are needed even more in Black communities because of the greater rates of poverty.

Despite, what can only be described as the economic free fall, besieging African American communities there has been very little space in formal politics to address any of these issues.

Any call for specific programs to address the specific ways in which the crisis is disproportionately affecting Black communities has been met with howls of disapproval from the right and liberals. The right, of course, denies that racism has anything to do with growing Black unemployment and poverty, while liberals worry that any programs that favorably target Blacks will leave Obama vulnerable to charges of doing “special favors” for African Americans. As the Rev. Al Sharpton said, it would “stupid” for Obama to have a “Black agenda.” The combination of worsening conditions with no political space to resolve them contributes to an overall political environment that is extremely volatile and potentially explosive as African Americans are pushed to find other means of resolving the crisis in their communities.

The rebellions across England this past summer demonstrated palpably what this alternative can look like when the volatile mix of economic crisis and repression mix over a long period of time. The almost three hundred urban rebellions in this country in the 1960s were also fueled by a frustration with an inability to find a peaceful resolution to the perpetual crisis of unemployment, underemployment, poor schools, substandard housing and police brutality. This is not to argue that the coming struggle will replicate what happened in the 1960s, rather it is to emphasize that people will fight back by whatever means they have regardless of whether or not the existing system creates the means for them to do so. In other words, just because the state and its political representatives ignore the demands of regular people, and Black people in particular, for relief from the crisis, does not mean people will simply stop fighting. It just means that will find other means.

Finally, the decision on campaigning against anti-Black racism is meant to underline our prioritization of recruiting African Americans to the ISO. Obviously anti-racist organizing and recruiting Blacks to the ISO has always been a priority of our organization. But the other reality of organizing in most cities is that racism and segregation can make it difficult to cultivate and develop a Black periphery thus there has to be some level of deliberate planning and strategizing to make it happen. This emphasis in our perspective is aimed at helping branches figure out how to do it.

As the organization began to take up this question, following the NC, the struggle to save Troy Davis’ life and the Occupy Wall St. (OWS) movement detonated in American politics creating a new found urgency around the Black question in American politics.

## Troy Davis and the Occupy movement

Coming out of the NC, there was some debate in the organization about why we were prioritizing anti-Black racism over other kind of racism. The leadership emphasized that focusing on anti-Black racism was not an attempt to “privilege” one form of oppression or another; rather it is rooted in an understanding of the centrality of anti-Black racism to American capitalism.

Moreover, we argued, that because of that relationship between anti-Black racism and American capitalism, when the Black struggle emerges, it has a disproportionate impact on all of American politics.

The frantic and heroic fight to save Troy Davis’ life proved this in practice. Activists and organizations in the death penalty abolition movement, including the Campaign to the Death Penalty, had fought for years to publicize the injustice surrounding the Davis case with minimal interest from the mainstream media.

But in the days leading up to his execution and shortly thereafter, thousands of activists and ordinary people mobilized around the country in response. Many, if not most, of those people were African Americans including the more than one hundred Howard University students who sat out front of the White House decrying Obama’s cowardly silence on Davis’ execution. The frenzied burst of activism in response to Davis’ execution put a renewed spotlight on racism and the criminal injustice system in the United States. It renewed calls to end the abomination of capital punishment and gave new attention to what legal scholar Michelle Alexander has called “The New Jim Crow.”

The activism also created momentum for what was then the new Occupy Wall St. movement. Just five days after OWS was launched a two thousand person march in New York City to the park that is headquarters to the OWS movement became a repository for hundreds of people who had become politically activated by the horror of watching the state execute Troy Davis. This phenomenon happened across the country as the Davis execution brought fresh attention to the full range of inequality in the United States— from the economic to the social and political.

The Troy Davis execution combined with the police attacks on the New York movement helped to galvanize the movement in general and contributed to its national breakthrough.

Since, the Occupy Movement, itself, has grappled with debates and arguments about how to expand the involvement of Blacks and Latinos and other persons of color. Some liberals have been disingenuously engaging in the debate, choosing to attack the movement while defending the status quo and ignoring how the Occupy movement itself has opened up all kinds of political space for protesting inequality, in general, in the U.S. There is also a very healthy quality to the debates, as activists clearly want to be a part of a movement that embraces antiracism and is inclusive.

Some of the genuine discussion about bringing African Americans and Latinos into the movement has spilled over into discussion in which “white privilege” is asserted as a central barrier to increased minority participation. This kind of logic and argumentation demonstrates in practice why clear anti-racist politics are as important as they have ever been.

First we have to say that despite the claims of some, African Americans have not been passive in response to the Occupy movement but those active in the movement have been trying to bring Black and brown issues into the center of the organizing by raising the particular ways the economic crisis and the greed of Wall St. impacts Black communities. This effort has led to the organizing of Occupy the Hood and various, related offshoots. In many of the Occupations exist ‘people of color’ working groups whose main purpose is to create more racial diversity within the movement.

Beyond what happens directly with the Occupy movement, though, the movement itself has legitimized protesting inequality and injustice in the United States. One result of this has been the growing call for those facing foreclosure and eviction to simply “occupy” their homes and refuse to leave.

Second, we should be concrete about how to draw in more African Americans and Latinos to the movement, which starts with putting antiracist issues and demands at the center of the struggle. Again, it is important to emphasize that this is not about “privileging” one oppression over another, but it is about recognizing how in this country, racial inequality often overlaps with economic inequality making African Americans and Latinos the most oppressed sections of the working class. It is also important to win people to the understanding that Black and Latino communities are not just victimized by economic inequality but social and political injustice that ranges from police brutality, unfair prison sentences, to threats of deportation, to the harassment and bullying being endured by Latino school children in the Alabama school system where racial profiling for “illegals” has been sanctioned by federal courts.

The working class movement is as strong as its weakest link and by prioritizing the demands of the most oppressed it raises the greatest possibility of a united, multiracial struggle that cannot be broken by racism and race-baiting. Arguing and attempting to win the movement to not only take up the economic demands against corporate and capitalist greed, but to also take up the issues of racial and ethnic oppression that are a result of the class division of capitalist society can raise the political level of the movement as a whole in terms of understanding the dynamic relationship between economic and political struggles and the need to engage in both.

### **Race and class in the United States**

This is a Marxist method that is steeped in the understanding of the centrality of racism to American capitalism and politics and how that must be combatted by fighting for unity on a political basis within the working class movement. It requires understanding why racism is so central to American capitalism in the first place. Racism is a lynchpin of American capitalism. It developed to justify slavery but since Reconstruction, racism has been a central tool of American capitalist to impede unity within the working class and has been a main fetter on the development of class-consciousness.

Karl Marx identified this dynamic when he described the impact of slavery on the development of the worker's movement in the United States,

In the USA, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.

From the Civil War to end slavery, to struggles of the 1930s that brought together Black and white workers to fight for industrial unions as well as the creation of the welfare state, to the Black freedom struggle of the 1960s which threatened the system itself, when racism has been challenged through mass struggle, the class struggle itself advances. Thus, Black liberation and the politics of anti-racism has always been the cornerstone of the revolutionary tradition in the United States.

For whatever political shortcomings the American Communist Party had in the 1920s and 1930s, their record on fighting racism is unassailable and represents a model for the revolutionary left today. The CP took on evictions, police brutality, job discrimination, the death penalty, and union organizing among Black sharecroppers in the South. By the end of the 1930s they had amassed the largest Black membership outside of race membership organizations like the NAACP. They accomplished this despite legal and virulent racism against Blacks because of a consistent record of coming to the defense of the Black population under any circumstances.

While socialists do not rank oppressions, anti- Black racism has been the central divide in the American working class and for that reason we place a particular focus on orienting to African Americans and their struggle against racism.

African Americans are disproportionately working class and because of the extreme oppression—from slavery to existing under legal racism for one hundred years after and de facto racism in the North—under which Black people have lived, they also have tended to be disproportionately drawn to militancy and radical and revolutionary politics.

Because anti-Black racism is so central to American capitalism, when Black workers protest or revolt, it impacts the entire society. One needs to look no further than the 1960s to understand this dynamic. The Black struggle not only ended Jim Crow in the South, but it spawned and influenced every major social struggle of the decade—from the anti-Viet Nam War movement, to the student movement, to the wildcat labor movement, to the development of the revolutionary Left itself. This is why the federal government expended so many financial and political resources to crush and co-opt the Black struggle.

The collapse of the Black movement in the 1960s has meant 40 years of relentless downward pressure on African American living standards. And the further Black living standards fall, the greater downward pressure is exerted on the wages and quality of life of the entire working class.

This, of course, is the central problem with the arguments for “white privilege” which ignore how the promotion and acceptance of racism among the working class is not a benefit to white workers, instead it has contributed to the four decade decline of wages and benefits for all workers. It is no coincidence that in the 1980s when the massive transfer of wealth from the poor and working class to the rich gained fierce momentum coincided with a virulent racist attack on Black America with an intense focus on scapegoating

at its heart. From President Ronald Reagan's invention of Black "welfare queens" to the so-called "war on drugs" which began the historic high levels of Black incarceration, racism was used to divide the working class while the rich got away with what political commentator Kevin Phillips described as the greatest transfer of wealth in a society without a social revolution preceding it.

This is not argue that Black and white workers experience life under capitalism in the same way—they do not. Marxists start with the premise that all workers under capitalism are oppressed, but some workers face added oppression because of added discrimination like racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-immigrant ideas, religious oppression, etc. Thus, in the United States, white workers are oppressed but not to the same degree, or as much, as non-white workers.

This means that oppression is not just an ideological tool to divide groups of workers, but that it has real material consequences as well. In other words, racism is not just a series of bad ideas promoted to divide the working class. The existence of racism in our society means that there are real material differences between Blacks and whites, for example. The median income for white families in the United States is in excess of \$50,000 plus a year. For Blacks it's less than \$33,000. In every measure of the quality of life in the United States whites are on the top and Blacks are on the bottom. Marxists do not deny these differences exists nor do we deny that oppression means that the lives of some workers are actually worse than others, but for Marxists the key is understanding the cause of the differences.

Is the cause of those disparities white workers benefitting directly from the oppression of Black workers? That is, do white workers make more on average because Black workers make less? To accept this explanation is remove the biggest beneficiary of all in the disparity between wages—employers and bosses. That employers are able to use racism to justify paying Black workers less, brings the wages of all workers down and it is the employers who enjoy the difference.

Moreover, it is an acceptance of the capitalists' logic that there are limited resources in society and that workers are necessarily in competition for them. Of course, capitalism has created the riches to satisfy all of the needs of the working class as whole but our access and ultimate control of those resources is a political question of organization and social strength.

Nevertheless, that the interests of the working class are collective, does not deny that white workers receive some advantages in American society because they are white in a racist society.

If they did not get some advantage—and with it the illusion that the system works for them—then racism would not really work at dividing Black and white workers.

The distinctions and differences among workers function to create a distorted view of reality that turns the traits attributed to the oppressed into a kind of "common sense" which works to deepen the divisions between workers. African

Americans are poorer, have worse housing, go to worse schools, have shorter life span and generally live in worse conditions, which helps to perpetuate the image in the minds of white workers that, in fact, African Americans are inferior. But the problem with so-called "commonsense" it is that it is based on surface appearances and information and does not reach beneath the surface to give a systemic explanation for the disparities that exist in society.

## **Next Steps**

The opportunity to build the various struggles against anti-Black racism in the United States is vast. This work can and should dovetail with the current work every branch in the organization is already engaged with in the Occupy Movement. We should be working to help initiate and organize Occupy the Hoods where possible or People of Color working groups with the aim of building solidarity and actions within the affected communities of color. This can include taking on cases of police brutality, challenging different aspects of the New Jim Crow, organizing against evictions and foreclosures, taking on school closures in Black neighborhoods or challenging the closing of post offices which will overwhelmingly affect Black workers.

This is also an argument for why the inclusion of trade unions is crucial. For those who don't know, African Americans are overrepresented in unions and have the highest density rate at 13 percent. In New York City we saw how the inclusion of union workers, outreach to trade unions, and the taking up of union demands dramatically transformed the demographics of the protest as more Black and brown workers were included. The same dynamic has followed in other cities where unions have become more involved the struggle has become more diverse.

The struggle against evictions and foreclosures are picking up steam as the Occupy movement has helped to highlight and underline the dirty tricks the banks used to both push expensive and predatory loans in Black and Latino communities as well as the dirty tricks they are using to try and steal people's homes through foreclosure now. The foreclosure crisis has been particularly intense in these communities and greater unemployment over a longer period of time and greater poverty has left people of color particularly unable to pay their inflated mortgage payments. This represents a very concrete opportunity for the Occupy movement to connect with Black and brown communities while highlighting the overlapping nature of racial and economic inequality in the U.S.

Finally, in order to play a leading role in coming Black struggles we need to begin to recruit more African Americans that are trained in the Marxist method who can lead struggles. It means involving ourselves in the small, but important struggles that happen today. These struggles are where we may meet the leaders of tomorrow and where our members, collaborators and allies are trained in the basics of struggle.

**KT, for the steering committee**

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