

**'PASSING IT ON:'**  
**REFLECTIONS OF A WHITE ANTI-RACIST SOLIDARITY ORGANIZER**

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*The purpose of this chapter is to share reflections on the goals, strategies, pedagogies, and challenges of practicing different kinds of accountability during the 13 year herstory of the San Francisco-based Challenging White Supremacy Workshop..*

*The perspective is that of its co-founder and coordinator; so the narrative will use a lot of 'I statements.' The discussion will not attempt to present perspectives of workshop participants on the workshop's effectiveness, which is a story for another time.*

**ABOUT THE CWS WORKSHOP**

The mission of the CWS Workshop was to 'train principled and effective grassroots antiracist organizers.' Typical workshops were called 'Becoming an Anti-Racist Activist,' 'Becoming an Anti-Racist Organizer,' or 'Introduction to Grassroots Anti-Racist Organizing.' The workshop began in the Spring of 1993, after its co-founders were inspired by participating in The People's Institute's UNDOING RACISM WORKSHOP. The CWS workshop closed in June 2005.

Each workshop lasted from 10 to 15 weeks, and met 3 hours per week. Participants were expected to complete reading assignments of 100-150 pages per week, to volunteer in a prearranged racial justice organization for 6 to 8 hours per week, and to raise funds to pay the honoraria for organizers of color who presented to the workshop.

Workshop participants were mostly white, college-educated, working and middle class grassroots social justice activists between the ages of 20 and 30. Approximately 90% of each workshop class of 30 were women; and 60% were lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered activists. After 2001, all applicants had to have at least 1-2 years of prior experience as social justice activists in order to participate in the workshop.

In its last five years, the CWS Workshop developed a program for more experienced grassroots antiracist activists called 'The Workshop as a Lab.' Prior workshop participants took on various workshop roles as preparation for their antiracist community work. They learned to become Small Group Organizers (aka facilitators). They adapted certain workshops focused on challenging white privilege and facilitated these workshop sessions. They mentored workshop participants, who were volunteering with local racial justice organizations, in some basic principles and practices of accountable behavior. They trained other participants in grassroots fundraising tactics. They recruited and interviewed potential workshop participants; and they organized all workshop logistics. This group of antiracist organizers-in-training became known as the workshop's Organizing Crew. They spent 4 months in intensive training preparing for their workshop roles.

## **CWS AS A 'SOLIDARITY' WORKSHOP**

The CWS Workshop was an antiracist solidarity workshop. Its co-founders, Mickey Ellinger and Sharon Martinas, came from a political tradition of white antiracist solidarity activists who, from the late 1960's through the 1980's, practiced our beliefs that a key role of U.S. white revolutionaries was to win other white activists to support national liberation movements on both sides of the U.S. borders.

Mickey and I grew up politically in the era of SNCC, the Black Panther Party, American Indian Movement, National Liberation Front of Vietnam, The Young Lords Party, the Puerto Rican Independence movement, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front of El Salvador, the Pan African Congress and the African National Congress of South Africa. All of these organizations and movements were fighting for land, justice and self-determination.

We believed that the struggles for justice of racially and nationally oppressed communities in the United States – Black, Puerto Rican, Mexican and Native people – were or could become national liberation movements, and that these movements, along with struggles abroad, could bring down U.S. imperialism. White activists had a specific role to play in organizing other white activists to see that anti-racist struggles were central to defeating U.S. imperialism.

Mickey and I created the CWS workshop as a political education project to pass on to a new generation the revolutionary tradition which had grounded our political lives. 'Back in the day' (1960's - 1980's), this tradition was called 'solidarity politics.' (1)

### **Goal #1: Passing On the Theory and Practice of Anti-Racist, Anti-Imperialist Solidarity Politics**

The first and most important form of accountability of the CWS workshop was to the ideology and political practice of 'solidarity politics.'

Winning people to this definition of accountability presented enormous challenges throughout the herstory of CWS: how to make a vision and a politic that came from a different time and world view relevant and meaningful to a young generation of white activists who were growing up in profoundly different political, social and economic times.

The early 1990s were very different from the late 1960s. By the time the CWS workshop opened its doors, the U.S. had crushed most national liberation movements world wide. Most white activists had no experience working with revolutionary movements led by people of color. They probably had never heard of the term 'solidarity,' and they lacked the experience to be able to discuss 'accountability' in doing 'solidarity work.' Nonetheless, we believed that it was still true that U.S. white supremacy was fundamental to the staying power of the U.S. system, so we searched for ways to translate that understanding to different movements in a different world.

### Working with Multiple Meanings of 'Accountability'

Through my study and reflections on the ways that The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, and its affiliated anti-racist white organization, European Dissent, used the term 'accountability,' I began to see relationships between the practices of 'accountability' and 'solidarity' that I knew from experience but for which I did not have the language. (2)

I also learned that there are multiple meanings of 'accountability' for social justice activists today. For example, here are just a few of the multiple meanings I learned from CWS workshop participants through the years:

\*\* For some, 'accountability' means the practice of doing what you say you're going to do, when you say you're going to do it, and calling if you can't get it done. In this meaning, 'accountability' is a synonym for 'dependability,' and connotes 'reliability' and 'ethical practice' of an individual activist.

\*\* 'Accountability' may also mean the process of building trustful, authentic relationships with others, both white and of color. Used in this sense, 'accountability' connotes 'relationship building,' especially between two people.

\*\* An activist may hold herself 'accountable' to a particular community organization, or specific group of people. 'Accountability' here may involve a feeling of 'loyalty,' and a practice referred to as "I've got your back." Trust built day by day, for a long period of time, is a key factor in this aspect of accountability.

\*\* A group of social or racial justice activists may hold themselves accountable to a particular social justice movement. In this meaning, 'accountability' combines general agreement with the political praxis (analysis, practice, evaluation, goals, visions) of that movement; as well as with the implicitly or explicitly shared cultural values and norms of that movement. When this meaning of accountability is experienced, participants often use the term 'community' to describe their participation in that movement.

In an anti-racist solidarity workshop, 'accountability' can and does involve all of the aspects mentioned above. But how can the *learning experience of a workshop*, which is not *the work*, as Catherine Jones points out in her powerful article, 'The Work is Not the Workshop: Talking and Doing, Visibility and Accountability in the White Anti-Racist Community', be utilized to frame the values and ethics of 'accountability' in the politics of 'anti-racist, anti-imperialist solidarity?' (3)

## **Goal #2: Practicing Anti-Racist Solidarity with Local Racial Justice Organizations**

Mickey and I understood that even though we could share our solidarity stories with workshop participants, we could not 'teach' solidarity. All we could do was to organize a political program that offered participants the opportunity to practice solidarity with organizations led by people of color so that they could experience how it might transform their lives as it had ours. No, we could not 'teach' solidarity, but perhaps our workshop program could 'model' it.

It took CWS years to develop an effective and accountable racial justice solidarity program for white workshop participants. However, by the time the workshop closed its doors in 2005, CWS's solidarity program was the strongest and most effective component of the workshop's curriculum.

I learned through error and trial, in that order, how difficult it is to use a workshop to prepare mostly white participants to practice accountable solidarity relationships with organizers and organizations of color. Here are some of the lessons I am still learning about how to do this work in an accountable and effective way:

*\*\*\* It helps to have a definition of 'solidarity' to provide a political foundation for the workshop's anti-racist solidarity program.*

CWS's definition of 'solidarity' was 'an act of bonding with a people struggling for their liberation.' The definition was influenced by Mickey's and my political experiences as anti-racist, anti-imperialist organizers in solidarity with national liberation movements of the 1960's through the 1980's.

Most workshop participants tended to use the term 'being an ally' rather than 'standing in solidarity.' But 'being an ally' connotes an individual relationship to another individual, whereas 'standing in solidarity' assumes an organization to organization relationship in the context of a movement for self-determination of thousands of oppressed people -- even whole nations--struggling to free themselves from the system of U.S. imperialism.

It wasn't until 2001, eight years after CWS began, that a young activist, politicized in the Bay Area racial justice struggles of the 1990's, asked in a workshop session, "Sharon, what does 'solidarity' mean today?" I responded, "I think you are already practicing it, because you have the experience to ask that question."

*\*\*\* To practice anti-racist solidarity work, I think we have to understand what 'respecting the leadership of organizers of color' means. White workshop participants need to be given the opportunity to experience it for themselves. That experience has the capacity to transform their lives, if they are open to that transformation. But if they only read about 'leadership' in a workshop reader, the experience may awaken their anti-racist consciousness, but not move them to making a life-time commitment to solidarity work.*

Therefore, a workshop anti-racist solidarity program must prioritize developing firm, accountable relationships with community organizations of color that are strong, guided by principles and practices of self-determination and accountability in their own communities; and whose vision, goals, strategies and practices can inspire, educate and motivate white anti-racist activists in the workshop.

The Bay Area is blessed with having many powerful grassroots radical organizations of color. But that development has not happened overnight. U.S. government attacks on national liberation organizations from the 60's through the 1980's decimated our local movements for justice. Many of our elders were imprisoned, murdered, or alive but of the 'walking wounded.'

A new generation of radical and revolutionary organizers of color emerged in the early 90's, in response to the Los Angeles uprising of 1992 after the trial of the policemen who beat Rodney King; and the first U.S. war against Iraq. These organizers developed their leadership capacities in the struggles for immigrant rights (fighting Prop. 187) and defending affirmative action against Prop. 209. (4) They honed their organizing capacities through training programs like SOUL (School of Unity and Liberation. (5) They led fierce demonstrations and grassroots electoral campaigns which CWS workshop participants participated in and supported. But their grassroots institutions, their community organizations, were still new and developing their own local leadership. Most of these organizations were not yet ready to consider taking on white volunteers, and many organizations were politically unwilling to do so. Their experiences with the racism of white social justice activists made them understandably distrustful of working with us.

In the years between the path-breaking Critical Resistance Conference at Berkeley in 1998 (6) and the Bush regime's wars against Iraq and the so-called 'war on terrorism' in 2001, the new generation of organizers of color had strengthened their grassroots institutions to the point that many were willing to experiment with taking on 'racial justice volunteers' from the CWS workshop. Our Racial Justice Volunteer program began in the Fall of 2001. It was coordinated by an experienced and accountable solidarity organizer named Brooke Atherton.

*\*\*\* While the experience of solidarity cannot be taught in a workshop, I believe that the practice of accountable behavior can be taught.*

A story of how CWS's racial justice volunteer program got off the ground might illustrate this point. In 2001, a coalition of organizations of color held a community forum to discuss, in a global justice framework, our movement's response to Bush's wars. CWS was invited to the forum and asked to help with childcare and logistics. Brooke headed up the volunteer coordination effort. When 25 mostly white volunteers who had signed up to work, came on time, did what they were asked to do with precision and humility, some organizers of color were so impressed they asked her to set up childcare for the weekly meetings of their organizations' membership.

One racial justice volunteer placement rapidly expanded to 15, as the word spread that CWS could provide organizations of color with accountable volunteers, mostly for routine tasks that overworked organizers of color were glad to share.

The Racial Justice Volunteer Coordinator did meticulous phone and personal followup with each CWS volunteer, checked regularly with the volunteer's supervisor at the host organization for feedback on the volunteer's work, developed a basic 'accountability check list' for volunteers, personally mentored the new Volunteer Coordinators for the next CWS workshop session, and contributed to writing the workshop's 'Racial Justice Program Booklet' which each workshop participant received as part of the CWS orientation program. (7) In all her work, Brooke modeled what it looked like in real life to practice accountable behavior as an anti-racist solidarity organizer.

As CWS workshop coordinator, I prioritized supporting the Racial Justice Program Coordinator's work, since I had already decided that the racial justice volunteer placement program was the core of CWS's programmatic work. This support involved sharing with her all my own experiences and lessons learned as an anti-racist solidarity organizer, and sharing her work load because she spent hundreds of volunteer hours as Racial Justice Program Coordinator. And it was up to me to do the heart-breaking work of having to ask a workshop participant to leave the workshop, if, after numerous discussions, the participant was still practicing unaccountable behavior -- like not showing up for her volunteer work shifts, and not calling her supervisor ahead of time.

Even with two organizers putting in so much time for the racial justice placement program, lots of vital work still fell through the cracks. Perhaps most important was that sometimes we did not learn about a participant's unaccountable behavior till the end of that workshop session, or when we were calling the organization the next season to see if they wanted CWS volunteers. It became obvious to me that the 'Workshop as a Lab' program, in which CWS trained the 'Organizing Crew' for the next 15 week workshop, needed to prioritize training new anti-racist solidarity activists to become solidarity organizers who could help coordinate the CWS Racial Justice Program.

*\*\*\* Becoming a Racial Justice Program Coordinator: reflections  
on some early steps*

In the last 3 or 4 years of the CWS workshop, we offered a workshop called 'Becoming an Anti-Racist Organizer.' (8) When that workshop was no longer offered because of the work load of trying to coordinate two 15 week workshops each year, we focused on a four month training program called 'Workshop as a Lab.' The program was geared to orient volunteers whom I had recruited from prior workshops to become the 'Organizing Crew' for the next workshop. (9)

Among the 'Organizing Crew' were activists whose primary anti-racist experience was in doing volunteer solidarity work with local racial justice organizations, led by organizers of color. Out of this group, came the new group of volunteer coordinators of the 'Racial Justice Volunteer Placement program.'

The efforts of these 3-5 Racial Justice Coordinators, working collaboratively together each workshop session, mentoring and supporting no more than 8 workshop participants each, vastly improved the accountability of the whole program, as well as strengthening their own skills and commitment to anti-racist solidarity organizing.

I began to dream of expanding CWS's racial justice volunteer program to include an intensive training curriculum for anti-racist solidarity organizers, grounded in 20-30 hours per week of volunteer internship with local racial justice organizations, mentoring from elder solidarity organizers in the community, and a new curriculum focused on developing their capacities as anti-racist solidarity organizers. Unfortunately, the CWS workshop ended unexpectedly in the Spring of 2005, so that dream was never realized.

*\*\*\* CWS tried to create a coordinated workshop curriculum and program that models what solidarity work looks like, on a daily basis, and sustainable for a life time.*

While the Racial Justice Volunteer Placement program was the core of the workshop's curriculum, it was not the only way in which participants learned what it might mean to do solidarity work. Other aspects of the work included:

\*\* Reading about the histories and contemporary struggles of national liberation and racial justice movements as a core part of the readers specially edited for the workshop. In practice this meant about 150 pages every other week. (Alternate reading weeks focused on the history of white supremacy and white privilege, and different essays by activists of color and white activists experienced in challenging the white privilege political and cultural expressions of social justice activists.)

\*\* Inviting guest organizers of color, many of whom coordinated the organizations with whom participants were volunteering, to speak about their racial justice organizing work. This part of the program, in conjunction with the readings mentioned above, was called 'Legacies of Liberation.'

\*\* Training workshop participants to do grassroots fundraising to make sure that guest trainers of color received a respectful honorarium for their willingness to share their wisdom with a predominantly white group through the panel presentations.

\*\* Learning how to invite their friends to the presentations by organizers of color, and to debrief with their friends after the workshop.

\*\* Setting up a weekly calendar of racial justice events and encouraging participants to go to these events and to invite their friends.

\*\* Training workshop participants in the art of 'practicing active listening,' so that when organizers of color presented to the workshop, participants were focused on what the organizers were saying, rather than jumping immediately to how, as white activists, they *felt* about the organizers' presentations.

\*\* Training Small Group Organizers in the art of respectfully refocusing small group discussion so that it started with what the presenters had actually said, before requesting participants' reflections. In a tiny way, this activity modeled how we white activists can 'decenter our whiteness' while learning to do solidarity work.

\*\* Making sure that small group discussions focused on connecting participants' experience with their racial justice placements with their readings, and their experiences within the workshop setting. (i.e., modeling 'the work is not the workshop.')

\*\* Organizing special small group discussions exclusively for discussion of racial justice volunteer placement experiences.

### **Goal #3: Learning the real history of the U.S. white supremacy system, especially its negative impact on white-led social justice movements**

In 1983, Robert Allen, an African American editor of 'The Black Scholar,' in collaboration with Pamela Allen, a white feminist who had been politicized in the Mississippi freedom struggle of the 1960's, wrote Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States. It's a history of how racism in white-dominated movements - from Abolitionism in the 19th century through the Central America Solidarity movements of the 1980's - have undermined and disrespected movements of peoples of color, and prevented the building of multi-racial alliances that might have ended systemic oppression and created new worlds of social justice for everyone in the U.S. The book blew my mind!

Mickey and I used the lessons from the book and our own experience with white social justice movements to create a curriculum on white privilege that was grounded in the history of the U.S. white supremacy system. We focused on the impact of the politics and practice of white privilege in social justice movements: how white privilege frames our movements' agendas, limits our choices of allies, harms equitable leadership development strategies, undermines resource-sharing, and prevents the development of relationships of mutual respect and trust with organizations and movements led by grassroots organizers of color.

We created interactive history exercises like 'How Mother Earth Became a Piece of Real Estate' -- focusing on the theme of land struggles, land loss of communities of color, and land grabs by European descended 'pioneers' backed up by federal government laws and policies-- and 'Family Herstories' during which participants interviewed their own elders for the hidden histories behind how European immigrants became white people. Great stuff!

But when we looked at contemporary white led social justice movements, especially those in which participants were actively involved, people complained about 'stereotyped role plays' and that 'their organizations' were being targeted, even though the rules of the exercises prohibited mentioning any groups by name.

I learned some tough lessons about challenging white privilege. White guilt can pop up in unexpected ways. Just because nothing is said personally, doesn't mean that folks don't take it personally. I also learned that I was a poor role model for practicing accountability toward white social justice movements, since I don't even believe they are practicing 'social justice' if they're doing their work in a racist way. My attitude came through, and frequently (and often justifiably) pissed people off.

### **Some Strategies: 'Creating an Anti-Racist Agenda'**

In spite of its hard edge, the 'no passing the hankies in this workshop' feel to it, CWS had a very optimistic strategy. To challenge white privilege in social justice movements, white activists can 'Create an Anti-Racist Agenda.' The 'Agenda' is grounded in six principles, which I called 'moral, spiritual, and political rudders that can guide individual and collective transformation of antiracist activists.'

#### **The principles are:**

- \*\* Act on your principles (Do the right thing. Practice and model respectful Behavior. Challenge white privilege);
- \*\* Create an antiracist culture of resistance (language, group dynamics, study of history);
- \*\* Stand in solidarity (with radical racial justice struggles);
- \*\* Prioritize the issues of radical organizers of color;
- \*\* Respect the leadership of radical organizers of color;
- \*\* Hold on to your visions (of a world without white supremacy).

The principles are based on learning to analyze, strategize, and practice antiracist political activities. It does not focus on emotional release, nor on delving deeply into personal stories.

The principles also suggest that the workshop is only a place to practice what we want to do in the world. It is not a substitute for that world. 'Workshopitis' doesn't help us become stronger antiracist organizers.

But often when I came home exhausted on Sunday nights after the workshop, I wondered, "How can I keep accountable, as a solidarity organizer, to radical organizers of color in the Bay Area when I'm spending 60 hours a week working almost exclusively with white activists?" In this period it was not possible for me to have a structured solidarity relationship with an organization, such as CISPES was able to have with the FMLN or the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee had with the New African Peoples Organization. My own moral, spiritual and political rudder often felt very much off its keel.

## **Creating an Anti-Racist Pedagogy for the Privileged: Many Unanswered Questions**

Even though I had been an anti-racist solidarity organizer and a grassroots political educator for nearly 30 years, I was ill prepared to create anti-racist curriculum for white social justice activists in the 1990's.

Sometimes participants and I miscommunicated because I didn't speak 'workshopese.' Consider these examples of linguistic challenges:

\*\* When young white workshop participants called me a 'facilitator' of the CWS workshop, I looked up the linguistic roots of 'facilitator' in my dictionary. Sure enough, 'facilitator' comes from 'facile': to make something easy. "Hell No!" I protested. "I don't want to make anti-racist work for white folks easy. I want it to be the most difficult work they've ever done in their lives. People of color are regularly murdered for doing racial justice work. Making it easy for white folks to do the same will just reinforce our white privilege, and strengthen the white supremacy system."

\*\* Small groups in the workshop operated on the principle of self-determination for participants of color: Activists of color could join groups with other people of color and bi-racial people, or they could join a white group if they wished to. White participants, on the other hand, could join only white small groups.

Once, an all white small group criticized the workshop for not allowing them enough time for processing. Their spokesperson was a young woman with blond, curly hair. I looked at her in confusion after she offered her criticism. "Processing"? I repeated. "Excuse me, but this is a workshop, not a hair salon. And I don't see any African American women in your group that might want their hair processed!"

But there were far more serious challenges in the curriculum creating activity. Here's a beginning list of questions that I grappled with, often unsuccessfully, during the herstory of the CWS workshop:

1. How can CWS pass on anti-racist solidarity politics that emerged in the era of strong national liberation movements in a very different world?
  - a. 'Back in the Day' we learned our politics by first looking at global power relations, then U.S. power relations, followed by power relations in our communities, and finally, what work we as activists should take up to help change these power imbalances.

Today, most workshop participants start their work with an "I statement:" How do I feel? What are my particular experiences? What are my skills and challenges? And then they slowly build their analysis out to a global world view. What impact does this have on exercise creation?

- b. 'Back in the Day,' most Third World national liberation struggles that were winning against U.S. imperialism around the world were governed by Marxist-Leninist political analyses and strategies. Most white anti-racist solidarity activists took our revolutionary cues from these winning movements, and believed we were 'correct' to do so.

Today, most college educated white workshop participants have learned to view the political and ideological world through the lens of 'post-modernism' which was founded by anti-Marxists and based on a belief that there are no political truths, only individuals' diverse perspectives. What impact does this culture clash have on curriculum?

- c. 'Back in the Day' many white solidarity activists tended to organize ourselves in democratic centralist organizations with strong leadership and high expectations of discipline. We tried to mirror the strengths of national liberation movements, which were involved in open warfare with U.S. imperialism.

Today, many or most young white social justice activists have been strongly influenced by feminist and anarchist organizational structures, which often value peer learning, collective decision making, and collaborative leadership. How can we create curriculum that is respectful of this democratic culture while challenging the cultural arrogance of some of the white movement's assumptions and values?

- d. 'Back in the Day,' political alliances and other organizing strategies tended to put more weight on having a similar political line: analysis and strategy. We focused more on results and effects.

Today, many white activists put as much or more weight on personal relationships with individual organizers. They tend to put as much or more emphasis on the process by which decisions and actions are made as on the results of those decisions and actions. What kinds of curriculum can challenge participants to evaluate both processes and results equally as needed?

- e. 'Back in the Day,' white middle class anti-racist solidarity activists were often able to do our work without worrying about paying huge debts to banks for our college education; and white working class folks were still able to guarantee that their children would have a better life financially than they did.

Today, though white activists still have far more financial flexibility and access to networks of white class privilege than activists of color, their time of relative financial 'freedom' is much shorter. And white working class folks have seen dramatic losses of jobs, income, and homes, with no basis for hoping that their children will have a better life.

How can our curriculum take account of the shrinking material benefits of white privilege in this neo-liberal era of global imperialism?

- f. ‘Back in the Day,’ white activists and activists of color believed that the revolution was around the corner so our pace of activity was frantic. Many of us felt we weren’t serious revolutionaries if we worried about ‘taking care of ourselves.’

Today, many white activists prioritize taking care of themselves as revolutionary work, a way to stay in for the long haul. They prioritize having a more balanced life, with time for friends and relaxation, as well as paid work and political activities. How do we develop a rigorous, tough curriculum which also respects the desire for a balanced life?

2. In the work of training white anti-racist solidarity organizers, how can CWS follow the effective organizing strategy of starting where people are at while maintaining strong anti-racist principles of keeping white people focused on the task of challenging our white privilege?

- a. CWS analyzed the social location of non-ruling class (i.e., poor, working and middle class) white people as being both oppressed and privileged. We are oppressed by class, gender, sexual orientation, age, politics, and physical ability; but we are privileged by race in relation to all peoples of color.

Many white social justice activists come into political consciousness through the experience of their own oppression. How can an anti-racist pedagogy of the privileged be created which can respectfully move activists from identity politics to solidarity politics?

- b. CWS had a race centered analysis. Like the Peoples Institute which inspired CWS, we saw racism as a major (not the only) barrier to building grassroots multi-racial alliances that could bring fundamental change to this country.

Many white participants in the workshop held an intersectionality analysis. They saw racism, patriarchy, classism and heterosexism as interrelated and equally powerful systems of oppression in the U.S. How can an anti-racist pedagogy of the privileged respect different political analyses of workshop participants while holding fast to the workshop’s fundamental political frames?

CWS’s solidarity principles talked about ‘respecting the leadership of people of color.’ We distinguished ‘respect’ from ‘following the leadership of people of color.’ What kinds of tools can we use to create a pedagogy of solidarity and accountability that fosters respect of white activists for organizers of color, while also supporting the crucial role of critical thinking on the part of young white activists?

3. CWS strongly believed in the importance of modeling effective, accountable and solidarity-practicing leadership as a part of the leadership development of a new generation of solidarity organizers.
  - a. Effective leadership necessitates one-on-one relationships with participants. But CWS was never able to carry this out because for most of its herstory, CWS had one workshop coordinator and up to 40 participants.
  - b. Accountable leadership requires being able to address daily problems that arise in a workshop on the spot. Because CWS had only one coordinator for most of its herstory, momentary decisions never had the crucial backing of several experienced souls collaborating together.
  - c. Accountable leadership for young white activists necessitates having leaders who are both grounded in historical solidarity politics and practice, and in contemporary white activist sub-cultures. CWS tried to function without that real multi-generational leadership for most of its existence.
  - d. Solidarity-practicing leadership is probably best modeled by a multi-racial team of workshop coordinators. CWS had that for only one of its 13 workshop years. (10)
  - e. In spite of these serious, long term leadership problems, this coordinator made the decision, year after year, that it was better to have a CWS workshop available, with all its problems, than none at all.

As I reflect on the many amazing, committed white anti-racist solidarity organizers who participated in a CWS workshop, and are now themselves modeling accountability and solidarity in grassroots movements around the country, I believe that I made the right decision.

### **TRANSITIONS**

In the Spring of 2005, CWS held its last workshop.

I can now reflect somewhat calmly on the workshop's inability to meet the multi-faceted challenges of trying to create an anti-racist pedagogy for the privileged. At the time, I felt like my life as an anti-racist solidarity organizer was finished and that I was a failure. This self-definition as a 'failed revolutionary' was not a particularly functional place from which to ask the obvious question, 'So what do I do now?'

## KATRINA SOLIDARITY WORK

Katrina answered the question for me. Glued to my television in September of 2005, I sat in 'shock and awe' as I saw New Orleans nearly destroyed by a government-made disaster. I shook with rage as I watched desperate New Orleanians abandoned on their rooftops simply because they were Black. I sobbed when I heard Malik Rahim, co-founder of Common Ground, tell a KPFA interviewer that the police had turned away a whole carload of health workers and all their supplies, because the emergency workers were African Americans.

At the same time, my email box was filled with messages from mostly white activists asking for others to join them to go to volunteer in New Orleans. Thousands of white activists have made that journey, and they've worked with grassroots groups, not with the Red Cross. They came with big hearts, wanting to help, some perhaps wanting an adventure. They came because they were able to. 'Have knapsack, will travel on a moment's notice' is a particular capacity that white and class privilege provides, especially to young adult activists who are healthy and do not yet have children.

These activists provided important relief services. Concentrating much of their work in the devastated Ninth Ward, they gutted houses, organized medical clinics, provided nourishing food and drinkable water, ran errands, set up computer communication systems, and created innovative child care and education projects. But for the most part they carried out their community work in total ignorance of the rich history of resistance to racism in New Orleans. They did not stop their work to listen to the stories of African American residents. They did not respect the centuries-old African American culture of New Orleans. And they often acted as if they knew what needed to be done, without first asking community residents what residents wanted to do.

Many grassroots activists of color in New Orleans began to express concerns about the behavior of white social justice volunteers. In response, experienced anti-racist organizers in New Orleans - mostly from the African American-led Peoples Institute for Survival and Beyond, and their white anti-racist collective, European Dissent - began to network with their counterparts around the country. Many of the national activists knew each other from CWS workshops in San Francisco and from the national anti-racist movement building activities of the Catalyst Project, also based in San Francisco. In the language of The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, these anti-racist organizers networked; they built a 'net that works.'

Out of dozens of cross country phone conversations emerged a new anti-racist organizing strategy.

We would act in solidarity with the growing grassroots racial justice movement in New Orleans that was working for the 'right of return' of all 'internally displaced persons' to their home communities in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. (11)

We would recruit experienced white anti-racist organizers to go to New Orleans to partner with local anti-racist organizers, and we would provide political support for these solidarity organizers in New Orleans.

We would collaborate closely with the Peoples Institute and European Dissent in their efforts to provide anti-racist political education and mentoring to white social justice volunteers, so that these volunteers might learn to do their work with accountability to the African American community, and solidarity with local racial justice organizations led by organizers of color.

We would encourage these ‘outside’ anti-racist solidarity organizers to continue doing Katrina solidarity work when they returned to their home and campus communities. (12)

Out of this national anti-racist solidarity effort has emerged a new generation of white anti-racist organizers in New Orleans. This new generation gives me great hope for the future.

**Learning From History:  
The Legacies of the Black Liberation Movement  
and the 'First,' 'Second,' and 'Third' Reconstructions'**

Many organizers affiliated with the movement for the right of return called this movement part of the ‘Third Reconstruction.’ They hoped that a Black Liberation Movement for justice, dignity and self-determination, led by residents forcibly displaced by U.S. government policies, would bring on a new era of justice and democracy in the U.S., as did their ancestors in the eras of the First and Second Reconstructions.

The First Reconstruction (1865-1877) was initiated and inspired by the mass movement of formerly enslaved African Americans, in alliance with free African Americans and progressive whites, north and south. Together, this alliance created Southern legislatures with substantial Black representation, built the first comprehensive free public school system in the U.S., and brought social welfare programs to both African Americans and poor whites for the first time in U.S. history.

In 1877, the federal government abruptly ended this experiment in multi-racial grassroots democracy. They withdrew the U.S. army from the South, disarmed all Black soldiers, and ignored, even supported the vicious violence of the KKK, the lynching of thousands of African Americans, and the construction of almost a century of legal apartheid in the South. (13)

The Second Reconstruction (1955-1975) was the period of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Once again, African Americans led a mass movement for dignity, human and civil rights, and self-determination. This time they built a broad multi-racial and multi-class alliance of millions of people: Latinos, Puerto Ricans, Asian Americans and progressive whites. Once again, this alliance pressured the government to enact broad measures of racial and social justice. And it inspired new social justice movements: women's liberation, LGBT justice, anti-war, students and locally based grassroots organizing against poverty and for human rights. (14)

Many people believed that it was possible that the U.S. could actually be radically transformed. In the title of a book on the period, there was "Revolution in the Air." (15)

Sadly, history repeated itself. Once again, the U.S. government and its allies in the political parties and corporations crushed this liberation movement with betrayal and murderous violence. In 2009, we are still living through the aftermath of the near destruction of the Black Liberation Movement.

### **Learning From History? The Roles of White Anti-Racist Solidarity Activists in the Third Reconstruction**

Reading the tangled histories of racism and anti-racism in white social justice movements after both the First and Second Reconstruction periods suggests to me that many white activists in those movements at first worked in solidarity with African Americans struggling for freedom. These activists learned vital organizing skills from their solidarity work, and then went back home to organize in their own communities.

Most of these white activists proceeded to build strong movements against their own oppression (class, gender, sexuality, social location or issue) at the expense of the concerns of the Black Liberation movements which had taught them what it means to fight for justice, inspired their work and opened the political space in which to win their own demands. The tiny minority of white activists who remembered their political roots were mostly marginalized and silenced. (16)

The politics of the Challenging White Supremacy workshop -- its concept of 'Creating an Anti-Racist Agenda' and its emphasis on solidarity with radical grassroots organizations of color -- was a direct response by its co-founders to our first hand experiences of these betrayals in the aftermath of the Second Reconstruction.

Nearly three decades later there is a new white anti-racist movement in this country. It is young and fragile, but it is national, growing, and one of its epicenters is New Orleans. (Another is the Bay Area, where the Catalyst Project is beginning the second season of its path-breaking 'Anne Braden Training Program' for white social justice activists at the time of the writing of this article. (17)

I believe that the new generation of white anti-racist solidarity activists has both the tools and the demonstrated commitment to make a new history as part of the Third Reconstruction. They have the capacity to stay with the struggle as long as it takes.

That's why I am so hopeful. The work has been passed on.

### END NOTES

(1) See Dan Berger, 'Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity.' 'Enemies of the State: Interviews with anti-imperialist political prisoners Marilyn Buck, David Gilbert and Laura Whitehorn;' 'Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism, the political statement of the Weather Underground;' Breakthrough, the political journal of Prairie Fire Organizing Committee; and No KKK! No Fascist USA!, the newspaper of the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee.)

(2) The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, an anti-racist training organization based in New Orleans, defines *accountability* as:

“Accountability is a position by which one will be held in check or account for one's decisions and actions...the acceptance of a role fits within a cultural, political, and social perspective that leads to the liberation of peoples of color from racism, oppression and cultural subordination. It requires a commitment to the vision of African Americans and other oppressed peoples to assume self-determination over those areas deemed by them to directly affect their lives.” (Definition heard at an *Undoing Racism Workshop* by PISAB.)

European Dissent, the anti-racist white organization affiliated with The People's Institute, reminded me, through their early newsletters, that a key aspect of 'accountability' is *commitment*. Some expressions of commitment are:

\*\* Among a group of white anti-racist activists, taking a stand against racism, in both personal and public lives; being honest, trusting, respectful and caring of each other; supporting each other on their anti-racist paths;

\*\* Supporting and respecting the group by coming to meetings regularly, carrying out assigned tasks, bringing in new members, and working to maintain the group's integrity;

\*\* Working with other white people to respectfully challenge racism, promote anti-racist culture and networks;

\*\* With people of color, accepting leadership of people of color while defining within the allied group what precisely 'accepting leadership' really means.

(3) Read Catherine's essay at [www.cwsworkshop.org/katrinareader/node/404](http://www.cwsworkshop.org/katrinareader/node/404).

(4) Proposition 187 asserted that immigrants without papers could not get health care or receive an education, and would have made health workers and teachers into immigration cops, reporting immigrants to the Immigration and Naturalization Services for deportation. Proposition 209 made it illegal to utilize affirmative action programs for people of color and white women to challenge inequities in jobs, education and public contracts in California.

(5) SOUL's website is [www.schoolofunityandliberation.org](http://www.schoolofunityandliberation.org).

(6) Critical Resistance's website is [www.criticalresistance.org](http://www.criticalresistance.org).

(7) For a copy of CWS's 'Racial Justice Program' booklet, please email [cws@igc.org](mailto:cws@igc.org).

(8) For a typical workshop agenda, see [www.csworkshop.org](http://www.csworkshop.org).

(9) For more details on the agenda for this training program, please email Sharon at [cws@igc.org](mailto:cws@igc.org).

(10) Elizabeth 'Betita' Martinez co-coordinated the workshop for the Spring session of 2001. As a co-coordinator of the Institute for MultiRacial Justice, she recruited activists of color, and CWS recruited predominantly white activists. We planned our agenda topics collaboratively, but with different emphases. The two groups of participants met together every other week. Alternate weeks featured separate meetings with separate emphases appropriate to each group's participants.

At the end of the workshop session, CWS participants evaluated their time spent with the Institute's participants as vital to their learning experiences. But the participants of color in the Institute's workshop evaluated their time spent jointly with the white activists as mostly wasted. They requested an entirely separate workshop for the coming fall. This was one more lesson for us as coordinators about the challenging work of attempting to build and strengthen multi-racial relationships that involve white activists!

(11) 'Internally Displaced Persons' is a United Nations Human Rights designation for people displaced by war or natural disaster from their homelands, but who are still in their country of residence. Under the UN Treaty, to which the U.S. is a signatory, Internally Displaced Persons have the right to return to their home communities, and to receive adequate restitution from the central government. For more information, please check out the website of the U.S. Human Rights Network: [www.ushrnetwork.org](http://www.ushrnetwork.org).

(12) For some eloquent accounts of this work, see [www.csworkshop.org/katrinareader](http://www.csworkshop.org/katrinareader). Click on 'Anti-Racist Solidarity: Perspectives and Tools.' Check out the organizational accounts by European Dissent, the Catalyst Project, and the Anti-Racist Working Group. For individual reflections by members of these organizations, read the essays by Ingrid Chapman, Catherine Jones, Rachel Luft, Molly McClure and Pamela Nath.

(13) The classic account of the Reconstruction period is W.E.B. Dubois, Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880. (NY: Atheneum, 1973).

(14) The term 'The Second Reconstruction' is taken from Manning Marable's Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007. Third Edition)

Book on the 1960's are too numerous to mention here. I have my favorites, and would be happy to share a bibliography with you. Email me at [cws@igc.org](mailto:cws@igc.org).

(15) Max Elbaum, Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals turn to Lenin, Mao and Che. (NY: Verso Books, 2002)

(16) For a history of this phenomenon, check out Robert and Pam Allen's Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States

See also the path-breaking analysis and strategy developed by SNCC, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. In 1966, SNCC became an organization advocating Black Power. In an illuminating article, SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael explained the multiple aspects of Black Power as SNCC understood it, and why they had asked white activists and supporters of SNCC to go organize against racism in their own communities, where racism is located, in order to be able to help build the kinds of multi-racial alliances that could effectively challenge the white supremacy system in the U.S. (See Stokely Carmichael, 'What We Want: SNCC Chairman Talks about Black Power.' [New York Review of Books: Sept. 22, 1966]

(17) The Catalyst Project's website is [www.collectiveliberation.org](http://www.collectiveliberation.org).