



BLACK VOICES CALL FOR NEW APPROACHES TO IMMIGRATION REFORM

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This document offers the perspectives of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI) and the Southeast Regional Economic Justice Network (REJN) on the struggle for fair and just immigration reform and the issues that the immigrant rights movement and the social justice movement as a whole must tackle to achieve it.

It's A New Day

Neoliberal¹ Globalization has changed the political and economic landscape –domestically and internationally—and is forcing us to think and work in new ways. Now that the bankruptcy of unfettered capitalism has been exposed and people in every class are getting a taste of the insecurity and lost wealth, if not hunger and homelessness, experienced by the droves of people of color, extreme poor, workers and others who have been the primary casualties of the corporate driven neoliberal agenda over the past 2½ decades, there is a broader base of people wanting reform. Not enough, however, are addressing the system of policies and institutions that are the cause of our miseries and are still locked into piecemeal strategies. Immigration is an urgent issue precisely because 200 million people across the globe have been propelled into migration by these policies, by the wars, collapsed economies, destabilization, ruined environments, and genocide they have engendered. Only 2% have come to the US, yet their presence is transforming local communities and base organizing, in rural and urban areas alike. Rather than create a Marshall plan to help these survivors [at home and abroad] cope, nations, particularly in the West, have criminalized many of them.

These new realities challenge our social justice movements to:

- **Think macro and micro** [global/national/state/local] and **long and short-term simultaneously**, taking into account specific on-the-ground circumstances and histories.
- Learn to appreciate, respect and **“negotiate vast diversities and tremendous complexities** that inclusivity requires.
- **Focus on causes** –structural impediments, policies & practices –and overlapping impacts, rather than isolated disparities, which implies intersectional analysis, or locating targets at the intersections of the overlaps, to maximize impact and building the broadest base of support.

¹ By neoliberal we are referring to free trade, structural adjustment, privatization, deregulation, dismantling the public sector, union busting, restricting civil rights, militarization, and other “free market” policies that allow capital to flow and corporations to operate without restrictions, and, of course, the institutions like the WTO, IMF and World Bank that help implement them.

- **Grapple with racism and wedge issues**, in recognition of their historic role in defeating every social movement, blatantly, as in the 1898 Wilmington (NC) coup d'etat and massacre, or more subtly, as in the more recent use of demeaning racially coded language and images (Willie Horton, welfare queens) in political campaigns or *"immigrants are taking jobs nobody wants"* to thwart union campaigns.
- **Forge a new model** of work that marries the shaping and content of policy reforms with base building practice that can galvanize communities across the nation into a powerful movement. To us this means building an inclusive peoples movement of scale, encompassing the widespread and various sectors that have been casualties of neoliberal policies, AND crafting and linking policy reforms in ways that benefit everyone.
- **Walk our talk.** We must model the society we say we are trying to build --be the justice we want to live and exemplify accountability—if we are to have any authenticity and credibility to offer real change. To the Immigrant Rights movement, for example, black immigrants—Africans, Afro Latin@s, Caribbean—have been largely invisible and excluded, both in participation, leadership and issue priorities. Racism in the immigrant rights movement is its Achilles' heel. If the Movement is to forge and lead a disparate and diverse base, then it must include the voices, perspectives and leadership of the marginalized, including the young, African descent immigrants and native born, and poor women.
- **Recognize national policies must address regional specificity** if they are to have national impact. National policy cannot rely on state implementation when "states rights"—which governs political will—and inadequate infrastructure eclipses impact in the South and other localities across the nation. The failure to address the structural conditions in the South have rendered the region the nation's sinkhole, which has dragged down wages, jobs, conditions, safety net, the nation towards the South's level of underdevelopment

How we respond as a progressive movement, particularly in these times of economic crisis, has everything to do with whether we can maximize a progressive movement that can win real change that will bring us economic prosperity, full political participation, social justice, accountable democracy and peace –for everyone, or whether we become more fractured and weak and lose the opportunity that the Obama victory has promised us for the next 7½ years. People of color, particularly younger generations, are the strategic center –and mass base—of progressive change in America. We have power collectively, but none of us have power by ourselves. *All for one and one for all* is not a new idea, but the era of globalization and internet technology has definitely given it new meaning and new possibility.

Race is at the Center of Immigrant Justice and Reform

Race, racism, and the struggle for racial justice are central to the immigrant experience and character of the movement for three main reasons:

- 1) Globalization policies have been an engine of racism, negatively impacting peoples of color disproportionately
- 2) Different understandings of race, identity, and racism, ill equip most immigrants to enter the racialized context of US society and politics, especially in the South. Most immigrants lack the savvy and organizing skill needed to address systemic racism, particularly in ways that enable them to build upon the successes of the struggles for civil and human rights and Native American sovereignty and to link with black folk. Many come to the US with negative stereotypes about African Americans and think Dr. M.L. King, Jr. corrected discrimination once and for all. We are

seen as weak and powerless, in short, as unworthy allies. We are not regarded as the revolutionary change-makers who, along with our allies, were the creative force behind social transformation in this country. They don't know our sacrifices and struggles succeeded in dismantling US apartheid and igniting a successful anti-war movement along with other social struggles that extended US democracy, civil rights and economic opportunity to many more than us – to women, immigrants, workers, environmentalists, LGBT, the poor, and the differently abled, —most of whom are white. They also don't appreciate that our victories were incomplete and have been unraveled by administrations over the past 25 years. These views prevail even now that we have a black president! .

- 3) US Immigration policies, structures and the way they are implemented (e.g. racial profiling) themselves are discriminatory and exclusionary, fraught with preferences and bias according to race, class, gender and sexual orientation. They perpetuate white supremacy and racial disparities. They allow employers, lenders, landlords, politicians, bureaucrats, and the organized Right to exploit, abuse, and manipulate native and foreign born people of color, driving a wedge that poses the most urgent threat to progressive politics in America. Thus, just immigration cannot be accomplished without addressing systemic policies as well as individual, institutional and structural racism.

Today, the struggle for immigrant rights is at the cutting edge of the struggles for racial and worker justice and to mounting a campaign to scrap neoliberal policies across the board. This recognition alone should be a uniting factor of labor, civil rights and immigrant rights movements. Addressing black exclusion from the formal economy, the super exploitation of immigrants, and the structural impediments that have perpetuated race/wealth/gender disparities in the U.S., most notably in the South, is at the heart of linking just immigration policy to sustainable economic recovery, one that installs a new set of just economic relations and can win broad support.

It will take native born blacks and immigrants joining together to shape policies for mutual benefit, which means recognizing how our struggles are intertwined and our successes are dependent upon one another.

Towards this end the African American community must come to grips with the new realities of race in the U.S.: the black-white paradigm has given way to a much more complex picture, marked not only with rising Latin@s and Asian populations that have brought people of color majorities to several states, but with ethnic constructs, such as Latin@, that defy race as we understand it. Thus, the political landscape for organizing is new to everyone, and to have impact, we will have to learn together how to organize and collaborate effectively, in mutual solidarity and equality.

A Human Rights Approach to Immigration

A holistic and comprehensive approach to just immigration policy must:

- Encompass values and principles that uphold the dignity, rights, justice and prosperity (not just opportunity) for everyone;
- Be linked to economic recovery policy that allows for the participation, decision-making, and benefit to everyone, particularly lifting those on the bottom;
- Address all who are affected, including black (African-descent) immigrants and poor women.

Because migration is a global phenomenon, just immigration cannot be achieved by domestic policy alone. The global nature of migration and suggests that fair and just policies must address:

- 1) The development needs in countries and communities from which people were compelled to depart.
- 2) Respect for and protection of the human rights of migrants in the countries where they arrive
- 3) The infrastructure and development needs of communities to which migrants come.

The right of people to stay in their own countries and to be productive, prosperous and safe is a fundamental part of the UN Human Rights Convention, which also requires that we challenge racial and religious profiling, immigrant raids, detentions and deportations without due process; and the militarization of the US border. The Far Right has championed these actions in the name of national security, but they have undermined the fundamental rights and political space of us all.

The Need for A Southern Strategy

Interestingly, immigration from the Global South and from other regions of the US has made the South an even more strategic region for winning a progressive agenda in America. Overwhelmingly black and white historically, this still largely rural region has and is undergoing stark transformation to one of vast diversity where over 100 languages are spoken. This new reality has brought both promise and serious challenges. The South now has the fastest growing Latino population in the nation AND the majority of African Americans (over 55%), many of whom reside in majority black districts. As was evidenced in Obama's election, the bastion of the Conservative Right is now undergoing political shifts, due in large part to the increase in majority minority counties and voting patterns of young white voters. Yet, the legacy of slavery, which established an economy of pollution, exploitation by outsiders, and exclusion, primarily through institutionalized perpetuation of white supremacy, lingers. Barriers to black voting still exist. And 287G, for example, has been implemented aggressively and abusively in the South, particularly in North Carolina. But, serious tensions between African Americans and immigrants have burst forth like geysers. Unfortunately, instead of seeing the South as critical to the possibility for national transformation, many national organizations and funders regard it as peripheral.

Movement Building

If the immigrant rights movement is to overcome its internal divisions and to build lasting cross-racial and cross-community alliances that wield power, it must broaden its strategic outlook and willingly grapple with tough, complicated problematics that defy quick fixes and sound bites. There are many questions progressive movements must solve together. Here are a few:

How do we take to scale educational strategies that address the causes of global migration and bridge multiple understandings of race, racism, and identity?

How do we balance the deep and longer-term work we all have to do to become authentic allies with the urgency of immediate campaigns?

How is comprehensive, just immigration reform linked to economic recovery that brings marginalized African Americans back into the formal economy, benefits everyone, and sustains the planet?