

LEGACIES OF RESISTANCE: WHITE ANTI-RACIST ACTIVISM

A Resource of the Catalyst Project - Compiled by Danni West

Wherever there has been oppression, there has been resistance. This resistance has included people who benefit from or are privileged by the oppression of others. Meaning that within the united states of amerika, white people have fought against white supremacist capitalist patriarchal domination and expansion. Here, the focus will be on the last 150 years or so of white anti-racist activism within u.s. amerikan history. We are prioritizing the stories of working class people's, Jewish people's, womyn's, queer, and trans folx organizing legacies in an attempt to challenge overlapping forms of oppression as we move forward with the on going and growing movement for collective liberation.

Abolition of Chattel Slavery

Sarah and Angelina Grimke are two white southern sisters who stepped up to become ferocious advocates for the abolition of slavery as well as for womyn's rights. Theodore Welt is a white abolitionist from Ohio who organized the sons of folx who held enslaved people to speak out against slavery. Upon being expelled from school for this organizing, he moved to Oberlin, Ohio to continue school and to work for the underground railroad. Thomas Garrett is another example of a white anti-racist worker on the underground railroad. When taken to court for his aid with escape, he used an out front legal strategy by declaring that, yes, he was guilty and also that he planned to continue his work for freedom. Thomas Garrett and Lucretia Mott are examples of the legacy of anti-racist radical religious organizing, both coming from a Quaker background. Lucretia's organizing work was for the abolition of slavery and also for womyn's rights. It is important that all four of these folx spent some time focused on leadership development by passing on their skills to build society's capacity for resistance.

Education

Many white anti-racists have focused on movement building by being an educator, working as a writer, teacher, workshop facilitator or through one-on-one mentorship. Pro-enslavement white southerners used the term "carpet baggers" to describe northerners who were moving into the South, typically to work for electoral politics or to teach. Carpet baggers, including the huge number of teachers (mostly womyn), were targeted with violence and lynching due to their anti-racist work. Helen Hunt Jackson was a writer and agitator for indigenous rights. Mab Segrest and Adrienne Rich represent a vibrant queer anti-racist anti-imperialist feminist organizing and writing tradition. Writing, as a form of anti-racist work, has become a larger focus for Ray Luc Levasseur and Marilyn Buck since being imprisoned in the amerikan prison system for actions from the underground in support of the United Freedom Front or the Black Liberation Army. Since his Students for a Democratic Society days, Mike Davis has worked to become a white anti-racist author and teacher of Urban Theory in southern California. Stephanie Guilloud is a young white anti-racist educator, writer, editor and organizer who currently works at Project South: Institute for the Elimination of Poverty & Genocide, an organization that uses popular education strategies to stimulate the movement for social and economic justice.

Labor Organizing

Multi-racial, anti-racist labor unions or organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies), the Brotherhood of Timberworkers, or the Communist Party, USA have been places white anti-racist people have spent their energy, attention, and lives. A few notable folks are Elizabeth Gurly Flynn and Mother Mary Jones both of these radical anti-racist white women organized for the Wobblies. Clyde Johnson (aka Thomas Burke and Al Jackson) worked for the Communist Party, from the underground, in the south working with a variety of groups but especially the Share Croppers Union (SCU). Eric Mann and Lian Hurst Mann organized with the United Auto Workers Union and their organizing continues today with grassroots organizations like Labor/Community Strategy Center. Sabina Virgo is a labor organizer who has been working for racial justice since the civil rights movement. Both the National Lawyers Guild and Communist Party, USA are examples of anti-racist organizations that are committed to justice work for the long-haul, having worked in the International Labor Defense of the Scottsboro Campaign steadily on through the civil rights movement and on up through the struggles for the freedom of Angela Y. Davis and all political prisoners. The National Lawyers Guild, the United States of America's first racially integrated bar association, began its legal and organizing work focused on Labor rights and disputes. Another institution that comes from labor organizing roots is the Highlander Research and Education Center (Previously Highlander Folk School).

Highlander Folk School and The Civil Rights Movement

Myles Horton is the southerner who was significant in the founding of the Highlander Folk School in the 1930s. Focusing on building a broad-based multi-racial, multi-issued movement for social and economic justice, Suzanne Pharr recently finished 5 years continuing the trainings and other work of the Highlander center as the first woman to be the director. A significant number of civil rights activists participated in workshops at the Highlander Center. Organizers like Anne Braden (whose training led her to work with the Southern Conference Educational Fund and later help to found the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Racial Justice) and Bob Zellner (currently an active civil rights activist who was involved with the Civil Rights Movement, largely through Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) attended the Highlander Center. Bonnie Kerness also attended Highlander and has continued a life of activism and organizing including work with the American Friends Service Committee Criminal Justice Program in New Jersey, the National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons, and the World Organization Against Torture/US.

Anti-Imperialism

Understandings of what white anti-racist solidarity is and anti-imperialist commitment evolve directly out of and along with labor organizing and civil rights movement work. The Patriot Party is a revolutionary party for poor and oppressed white people that was active in the late 1960s through mid 1970s. The work of the Patriot Party included coalition work (with the Black Panther Party, the Weather Underground, the Young Lords, the Brown Berets and I Wor Kuen), Free Breakfast for Children and Free Lumber Programs. Prairie Fire is an above ground anti-imperialist network that evolved from the political statements of the Weather Underground Organization. Another organization focused on working in coalition with communities of color and labor organizations to achieve economic equality and an end to all forms of racism by organizing for social programs, housing, education, fair labor practices and accountable policing, and immigrants' rights is New York Jews for Racial and Economic Justice. European Dissent is a collective of persons of European Descent who "dissent" from racist institutions and values designed to benefit them, which explores ways to practice The People's Institute principles in their personal, social family, and work lives. Organizers like Jyaphia Christos-Rodgers and Laura Manning, both of whom organize with European Dissent as well as within the Unitarian Universalist faith community, offer examples of intergenerational white anti-racist organizing. Immigrant Justice Solidarity Project is an organization made up of people from communities less affected by detention and deportation, who work and have relationships with organizations with bases in immigrant communities. IJSP defines itself as an abolitionist organization; they envision a world without prisons or political borders. Furthermore, they believe it is crucial to be fighting patriarchy, heterosexism, classism and all other forms of oppression.

Today's Young White Anti-Racist Organizers!

In the early 1990's, young white anti-racists put energy toward the Love and Rage network/anarchist federation. Prior to dissolving in 1998, members were very active in doing anti-Klan and anti-Nazi work, played a significant leadership role in building up Anti-Racist Action (ARA), in defending abortion clinics, in prisoner solidarity activism as well as Zapatista Solidarity organizing beginning in 1994. Members also were actively working against tuition hikes at the City University of New York (CUNY); and for a Living Wage campaign in Vermont. ARA grew as Minneapolis anti-racist Skinheads, along with others throughout the midwest and other regional youth subcultures, were uniting to get nazis out of their scenes. Largely sustaining coordination work of protests against Klan rallies, ARA's successes come from being a truly organic product of a youth culture. Today, young white anti-racist activists are finding many ways to work concretely for systemic change. Max Toth, a young white anti-racist, is a national organizer for United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), focusing on solidarity with campus workers through living wage campaigns, supporting unions on campus, and student support for organizing drives. Previous anti-racist work he has done has included working with a Childcare Collective co-founded by white anti-racist Elly Kugler. The Childcare Collective is a solidarity organization that provides free childcare to groups led by low-income women of color. The SF Day Labor Program Women's Collective at La Raza Centro Legal, COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere) and Jews for a Free Palestine are places that white anti-racist, anti-imperialist activist Jill Shenker has found to work.

Conclusion

This certainly is not an all-encompassing list. There are huge gaps and embarrassing little detail. The point is to provide a brief, brief overview of the strong, vibrant, varied and creative past of white privileged people being committed to and acting for the destruction of white supremacy. Specifically we have attempted to highlight folx who approach justice work through an understanding of the interconnectedness of systemic oppressions. We have tried to lift up people who are solid and quick examples.

For further exploration into the legacy of white anti-racist resistance please check out:

A Promise and A Way of Life by Becky Thompson

White Men Challenging Racism by Cooper Thompson

Memoir of A Race Traitor by Mab Segrest

Subversive Southerner by Catherine Fosl

No Surrender: Writings of an Anti-Imperialist Political Prisoner

by David Gilbert

In the Time of the Right by Suzanne Pharr

Also visit the Colours of Resistance website:

www.colours.mahost.org

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The Catalyst Project:

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