



## Lessons and attempts: Kali Akuno speaks from Jackson Threshold Magazine, February 9, 2015

*This winter, we sat down with Kali Akuno from Cooperation Jackson to discuss the movement in Jackson, Mississippi. He summarizes the experiences of Chokwe Lumumba's mayoral term, battling power in the city, and the failures of a popular front orientation.*

**Eric Ribellarsi: Can you tell us about the Jackson-Kush Plan's creation and its different components?**

Kali Akuno: The notion of Kush<sup>(1)</sup> was something that had been promoted in the Republic of New Afrika<sup>(2)</sup> for some time.

So, that wasn't particularly new. I think the new element was coming up with the organizing plan to realize it and identifying forces in our own ranks and allied ranks who would help move that agenda in concrete ways.

We identified three things that we were going to work off:

One, the central piece of it, was building peoples' assemblies. And the peoples' assemblies is one we brought from struggles all around the world, but it has some particular history to it in Mississippi going back to some of the mass meetings of that

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tradition in the 50s and 60s. So we kind of picked up on that. In 2005, after Katrina, we started organizing and brought in a number of peoples' assemblies to deal with the crisis that was happening with the folks who had been displaced from New Orleans and how they were being used to divide the Black working class in Jackson where folks had been dropped off. So the assembly discussed how to deal with some of those social needs and how to put pressure on the state to live up to certain obligations it had to folks it forcibly removed and displaced into Jackson and other places. We took that model and institutionalized it. That was kind of the cornerstone of what became the Jackson-Kush Plan.

The second piece was finding a means within the limitations of Jackson's economy to organize the Black working class and make sure it has some ownership over the means of production, as limited as they are in Jackson. That's where we really started to look at some of the things that have been tried within the Black Liberation Movement tradition, with cooperatives. We looked at the works of DuBois and many others. Cooperatives have had some limited successes in different periods and some major setbacks in others. But given the conditions in Jackson, we tried to deal with something that we could move on and would need to move on given the lack of development.

The third component was electoral engagement based on an overwhelming Black majority in Jackson and the counties that comprise the Kush, which are 80% Black. In all those communities you still have a great deal of knowledge, forces, and skills from people who were part of the struggles of the 50s, 60s and 70s who are still on the scene, still organizing and engaging in resistance to reactionary forces. We identified that we would try to develop and run some candidates. The more important piece was to develop an independent political vehicle.

The piece that I'm working on is developing cooperatives in Jackson, through Cooperation Jackson.

**Eric Ribellarsi: Why did you pick cooperatives as a particular focus among various aspects of the Jackson-Kush Plan?**

Kali Akuno: The Black working class in Jackson is seriously under-organized, but it comprises the overwhelming majority of Jackson. The labor unions have never had a strong presence in Jackson or anywhere else in Mississippi, except perhaps in some of the old canneries that existed, most of which are long since gone, and in the shipyards where some of the ships are built down in the southern part of Jackson. [And they've been] outside of the greatest concentrated and consistent working class organization in the state

which has primarily been among Black sharecroppers and Black farm owners [outside of] the urban environment in Jackson.

There is a gap there that needs to be addressed. Organizing the workers' cooperatives has been one strategic means to fill that void and to organize the Black working class into a strong economic force and political force. Ultimately, the success of the initiative is going to be dependent on how well we organize the Black working class.

We're not just trying to build small, "mom and pop" cooperatives, or something where there is collective ownership but it is not pressing the system in any kind of fundamental way. That is more spreading the spoils of the system in an egalitarian way.

That particular element [organizing the Black working class] is a critical lynch pin to make it a more radical project as opposed to a mere reform project. And that's easier said than done.

Workers we are engaging with are bringing a lot of false aspirations that they are going to come with new jobs for new owners. So this is going to be a long project combating that and getting folks to understand the solidarity they need to express and work toward, and to see that as a strength and not as a weakness. And that takes time given how socialized it is to think of ourselves in individualized and atomized ways, competing with each other. We have that dual task of building self-respect. Education is a key component of the work we have to do.

**Eric Ribellarsi: You mentioned a little bit about the productive capacity of Jackson. Can you talk about what industry exists there? What are the material conditions that exist for the people who live there?**

Kali Akuno: Mississippi is one of the poorest states, if not the poorest state, by most indicators you will find from government statistics, corporate statistics, health indicators, or average income. Most of the folks in Jackson are extremely poor. Folks are working two or three jobs each, bringing in solid combined annual income of \$25-30,000. That's both parents together.

If somebody is making \$10 an hour in Jackson, that's considered to be a good paying job. You still got folks who are making 4, 5, or 6 dollars. There are Black folks who've been in Mississippi with ancestors going back to the early 1800s when settlers first came over and displaced the indigenous, and you still got folks making those type of wages.

Public transportation virtually doesn't exist. You got the J train: it only goes to a few spots, stops running at 8 pm, doesn't run on Sundays, and only goes till 5 pm on Saturdays—it's not even easy for workers to get to and from work. They have to absorb the costs of going to and from work. The material conditions on the whole are pretty bad.

You have the state hospital, veterans' hospitals, the children's hospitals, private hospitals – St. Dominic's. Folks who are dealing with cancer, heart problems – they come in from all over the state to the capitol to get treated. You have a concentration of hospitals—that's the largest employer.

The second largest employer is the government – federal, state and local – with county and municipal being the two largest. The third largest employer is the universities. There's two HBCUs, two private colleges in town.

And the major piece outside of that is transport – either trucking or railroad. Jackson historically has been a major transport center – one of the nodes of trade and transport in

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the South. It sits on the pivotal x-axis from 55 freeway which takes you south to New Orleans and north to Chicago. Then you have highway 20 which goes from Atlanta to Dallas. Jackson is one of those transport stops along the way – Birmingham, Tuscaloosa and then Jackson, and in-between there. Moving goods and freight – corn, wheat, and bread – down the Mississippi River or out through the coast to be shipped elsewhere. Jackson is one of those hubs. The trucking industry and the rail industry are very strong.

Now a lot of those jobs don't count. If you factor in the actual value that is going on all those trains and trucks that stop in Jackson, that is probably the greatest concentration of wealth that is moved and concentrated in Jackson. But a lot of those workers – truck drivers, folks who work on the rail cars – they don't live in Jackson. They just stop there. That's a major piece that has to be looked at when we're looking at the area strategically; it has to be factored in to how Jackson is important to the economy of the South and the United States in general. It is kind of a waylay station of goods and services and transport. The vast majority of people in Jackson don't benefit. They don't control that or have access to it in any critical way other than in providing basic services, like fixing the train or working in a fast food restaurant or a strip club or some shit like that, that service the truck drivers or transport workers that come through.

The population is enough to make it the largest city in the state of Mississippi, but not strong enough to really enable the city to work and operate and grow at the level it was in the 1970s. Some of that has to do with leadership and some of that has to do with racial politics. It's transformation as a Black city has been late in coming; it didn't become majority Black really until the 1980s.

Folks moved in from a lot of impoverished surrounding counties in the east. In the 1910s, tens of thousands left to go to Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Oakland. But in all those places, jobs dried up, particularly in the 60s, and folks started to migrate into Jackson when industry there was already breaking down in the 1970s. Then when we moved in, a lot of the city moved further to the east.

Those who could – national and international capital – just moved their production overseas. What that meant is that you don't have in Jackson a significant Black working class that has a history of the type of social organization and memory of that like would you have in Birmingham – with all those Black workers who talk about their grandmother and grandfather being part of the coal or the steel unions and those type of organizations. You're talking about a population that was very poor in the countryside, came to the city, and in many respects probably got poorer. They weren't farming anymore or producing their own food stocks to keep themselves going. And that still plays a heavy role in Jackson today in terms of the social condition. That's the context that we're working in.

**Eric Ribellarsi: What about the Nissan vehicle production?**

Kali Akuno: Nissan has followed a very typical pattern that capital and that sector learned particularly in the late 1960s, after the rebellion in Detroit in '67. The lesson learned: don't put major production sites anywhere near Black working class communities. You might put them near enough so that folks could drive to them, but you don't want it surrounded by a community that is organized in a formal fashion. You have seen that replicated throughout the South after '67. Auto companies, whether they originate in Detroit like Ford, Chrysler, or General Motors, have moved a significant amount of production down to the South since then. But to rural communities like Canton, which is twenty minutes outside of Jackson. There is no population anywhere around. It is a city by itself—with one of the largest auto plants in the world. But anyone who works in the plant has to commute at least 20 minutes to get there. So, if there is going to be any major industrial action taken, it's going to have to be imported in. And if the workers want to organize from within, they are going to be fairly isolated unless they do a good deal of

mobilizing and getting folks there ahead of time. This isolation makes people depressed – they lose energy.

**Eric Ribellarsi: What about the production itself?**

Kali Akuno: They make 23 different models of cars in that plant. It's huge. Sixty percent of this production is for the domestic U.S. market and forty percent is for the international market, for Africa and Asia. There's about 25,000 workers tied to it and something like two-thirds of the workers who work at that plant live in Jackson. Roughly two-fifths of the workers have temporary status, so they are getting paid substantially lower than some of the first folks who came in. The trick is the conditions.

Even though the workers don't make as much as Detroit or other places, in Mississippi they are damn good wages – \$16 to 17 an hour starting at full-time. That's been hard for the organizers of the UAW to contend with – folks have one of the better jobs in Mississippi, so, “why would I strike for the union?” The biggest thing to understand is that even though sixty percent of the workers in the Nissan plant are Black, the plant is strategically set up so that production cannot be impacted by resistance from the Black working class and the Black community, like what happened in Detroit and other places.

**Eric Ribellarsi: I'd like to detour a bit and ask you about Chokwe, the late mayor of Jackson. Can you tell us some background about him?**

Kali Akuno: Chokwe was born in Detroit to a family that has some roots in the struggle. When folks are thinking of the particular Black Power movement in the late 1960s and 70s, Detroit was at the heart of that. He grew up in that context, in that environment. In 1968, while in college, he became a member of the Provisional Government for the Republic of New Afrika and

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worked closely with Imari Obadele for well over a decade from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. At which time, because of political differences, he moved and left the Republic of New Afrika with other folks from the Revolutionary Action Movement, and others who came together to form the New Afrikan People's Organization (NAPO) in

1983 and 1984. He was sort of the principal spokesperson and leader of that formation from 1984 till his death. About 30 years of concentrated work in that role in that organization.

**Eric Ribellarsi: You mentioned electoral work as one component of the Plan. What's your summation of the experience of electoral engagement?**

Kali Akuno: Getting involved in electoral politics wasn't something Chokwe had thought about or had any ambition to do. Myself and many others who were a part of that think-tank moved to execute that strategy, to move the Black majority and its leadership, first and foremost through the assemblies, secondly in the electoral process.

It was based upon an analysis which is very critical of any and all Black electoral engagement. Myself and most others in that group came fundamentally from a position that electoral politics is a dead-end strategy. But we kind of took a hard look and said: "In this context, what can be gained from doing this?" There were a couple of things we identified: sitting in that office, you can move some policies that would get the state off your back a little bit and create some space for the people's movement to gain some strength and give it more democratic space to operate. There was an attempt to have it be in service to the movement.

Whether we accomplished that – in some areas I think we did and in some areas there were some mistakes made during that short nine month period in office. We had some major internal struggles while Chokwe was in office around the political character of the administration and the program the administration carried out. It was veering in its earlier stages toward a popular front kind of orientation and too much weight, in my opinion, was given to Black petite-bourgeois forces, seeing them as being kind of essential to the governance aspects of office.

To actually administer the apparatus of the state, like fix the roads and do all the bureaucratic stuff like making sure all the lights worked, you needed that technical skill and expertise of those forces that had done that work before or had the intellectual training to be able to preform them. But with that came a cost, it gave them some weight to shape the program and the demands. So we had a struggle to remove a lot of those forces and push them more in the background and [we needed to] always keep in mind, that we were there to create more space for the Black working class to operate within, and [needed] to get out of the way of the autonomous projects and initiatives that were being carried through the vehicles like the people's assemblies. That was our purpose and role.

I think towards the last month and half, Chokwe was veering back in that [more radical] direction. I think some of the folks that we were allied with were starting to show their true colors in some unmistakable ways.

He was moving away from some of the tactics of the honeymoon period. The week before he actually died spoke to the evidence of that. He died before we could complete that transformation. That's a number of things unanswered and up in the air.

Some of the tactics had a negative impact on how the project and process was viewed by some elements of the Black working class. Once Chokwe died, his son

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ran and did fairly well in the Black community in the special election. He won 70% of the Black vote which normally means you'd win in a landslide, but what happened because of the programmatic confusion and us not really having the time to explain or for our forces to come together to really unite on how we wanted to assess that period and reflect that back to the people.

That really hampered the campaign and so what wound up happening is that even though we won 70% of the Black vote, voter turnout was low. Much lower in the Black community than it had been when Chokwe ran the first time. That enabled Tony and the new alliance to form against us to kind of hold the day by fracturing the Black vote just enough that the historic kind of white voter turnout gave sufficient numbers of about 2000 votes for Tony to win and be the mayor now.

So I think that is a hard lesson to be learned—or relearned. Pursuing this path of popular front orientation which we've seen time and time again by revolutionary forces is a dead-end path. And I think our short little period in office, if nothing else, just reproves that. How you struggle internally to not repeat those mistakes that somebody once tried – we're still summing that up. And we're producing some material to share with folks to say: “These are some things that absolutely must be done to safeguard yourself from making these right turns or these right shifts. If you don't have the capacity or the political will to not move in that direction, then you're going to be wasting a lot of time and energy in pursuit of that particular form of bourgeois politics.”

**Eric Ribellarsi: Could you talk a little about the situation since Chokwe's death? So you talked about the defeat in the elections, but I suspect a lot of people who**

**followed Jackson up to the election of Tony Yarber don't know who he is. What does Tony Yarber represent? And what has changed in the last six months?**

Kali Akuno: Tony represents the capacity of capital and the forces of reaction to regroup and to learn from their mistakes. And taking Tony, promoting him, they did a damn good job. They did their homework very well. The person who was the electoral opponent after the primary was this guy named Jonathan Lee who comes from a Black petty-bourgeois family, small merchants who owned several warehouses and were involved in some aspects of the transport trade I mentioned earlier. They were often used as the minority business partners for certain kinds of contracts with the city and the state. They kind of played that role for about 30 or 40 years. So he's a product of that – well-educated and was primed and poised to serve their interest.

The first Black mayor of Jackson was Harvey Johnson. He broke with the Black community to win the election. The Black community organized to get the police chief out of office. That wound up being successful in 1991 where he was finally forced to resign from the pressure of the first people's assembly – which Harvey Johnson was part of, had put together. Then, Harvey Johnson set his eye on a larger target.

It was a serious political fight because the mayor was doing everything he could to not get rid of the police chief. The people responded and the assembly came up and they nominated the civil rights' legend Henry Kirksey. Harvey was involved in the assembly at that time, but he didn't agree with the outcome. And largely he didn't agree because there were some white liberal forces with business interests – liberal in the Jackson context – who considered him to be the better candidate because he would not put any restrictions on any of their projects or the things they wanted.

Harvey ran against the wishes of the people's assembly with the support of white liberal forces and split the Black vote. And so

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in the '93 election, Kirksey lost, and the last white mayor of Jackson won. '97 rolls around, the assembly regroups, reforms and nominates Kirksey again.

By now, Harvey had gotten white liberal financiers during those four years to get positioned. He ran again and won in a landslide. So the first four years of the Harvey administration, he pretty much did what they wanted him to do. But at some point they split over some development downtown. In the second go-around, he had to do what

many folks saw Ray Nagin do: in 2001 he appealed to the popular front as “I’m the person who’s gonna protect Black interests and Black petty-bourgeois interests. Roll with me and I’m gonna fight against some of the things these folks are restricting me from doing – things that are against Black business interests.”

Basically, Harvey wanted a larger cut and they didn’t want to give him one – so he split with them on that. And he was smart enough to realize that if he mobilized the Black community he could win the vote the second time around. And he won in 2001, but white capitalists choked off any and all initiatives.

So he kind of had four years of stagnate activity during a time of a lot of accelerating white flight out of the city into the surrounding suburbs. Basically all the businesses created new strip malls out there. That was the period when unemployment in Jackson increased tremendously. So folks started scrambling for change and the same white allied forces who put Harvey in power the first go around did so with Frank Melton. Melton got in and didn’t listen to nobody, he was uncontrollable so they abandoned him the next go around and didn’t have a replacement.

Harvey ran with his political machine in place, got in and the same kind of stagnant thing occurred. They got wise, and probably during Harvey’s administration, they started to cultivate a younger Black generation of Black leadership and that’s where Jonathan Lee came into the picture. They sent him to all these training academies around the country – about how to speak, how to present himself, how to package ideas, how to do social media, marketing, and the whole docket. And then more importantly, they came up with a development plan and they put his face on Plan 2022.

Thankfully, what the Jackson Plan interrupted was Plan 2022<sup>(3)</sup>. They didn’t see us coming and thought we had no shot at winning the mayor since they’d taken over the people’s assembly. And Jonathon lost because he had no organic ties with the Black community, or organizations of the community, outside of the Black petty-bourgeois faction.

So what did they do? They found a true son of the soil, Tony Yarber, who’s a Black minister and more importantly, comes from a working class base with a single mom who was unemployed most of her life, had eight kids. Tony was in prison, sold drugs, was involved in gang activities in Jackson. He got out, put himself through college, got some scholarships, got his degree, became a minister.

He's got this typical "up by the bootstraps" story – you know, Black working class from south Jackson. So they wised up and said, "we can't make the same mistake we made with Johnson Lee" and this time we got to have somebody who has a working class background but who's moving into the middle class strata but has links and ties with all the institutions.

As soon as Chokwe was elected, they started sending him all these little docketts to get him trained, how to present himself, how to make commercials, how to do XYZ. We didn't really know until

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after the election how his electoral victory had created a local realignment. That realignment – with those liberal white forces that supported Harvey in his first go around, and Melton in his first, and Jonathan Lee – they formed a hard alliance on the local level with the white conservative reactionary forces, the Republican forces, to form a new solid right bloc.

Tony is indebted to them– that's who put him up. So they only unified their bases against our program in support of their own program. They went back to 2022 and just added a legitimate Black face to represent it. Shortly after the election you got Tony's commercial ads. During the election, ads against Chokwe Antar were paid for by Haley Barbour's<sup>(4)</sup> camp and his political machine. In return, Yarber and his crew got paid by Thad Cochran<sup>(5)</sup> to keep his seat against the Tea Party challenger, and without the Black vote coming over in the Republican primary he would've lost. Straight up, he would've lost.

He represents a new alliance between a small faction of the Black community, mainly the Black petty-bourgeoisie that is registered ideally with the Democratic Party, but is in a solid alliance with the Haley Barbours and the Thad Cochrans of Mississippi to form a new electoral bloc to control the city of Jackson. That's what Tony represents, straight up.

The biggest weakness they have is that the only way that coalition is going to be able to control Jackson in the future is if they have the same level of white turnout that they had during the special election, where 75% of all the white registered voters in the city of Jackson turn out. The highest number before then was 48%. So this was a considerable

jump, a serious mobilization that took place. Probably, under the best circumstances, that won't be replicated again.

So they have a little dilemma on their hands. It clearly exposed that Tony allied with the Republicans and he's gonna have a hard time moving a lot of the older Black electorate who have a clear understanding and memory of the old Republican Party, basically the old Dixiecrats.

We didn't see all the tentacles and extensions of it until a couple of months after the election. Some of it we're still uncovering – where the money came from and what debts and favors he has to fulfill.

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**Eric Ribellarsi: So in terms of a last question, what would you say to people in other cities? How have you related to the movement as a whole? What role do you think Jackson plays for the revolutionary movement as a whole or for progressive, radical, revolutionary people? How would you suggest that they relate to you?**

Kali Akuno: A lot of folks have been approaching us since Chokwe won the election about emulating certain aspects of what we've been doing. Most of it is very shallow. They look at the electoral content and think that is the linchpin or the key to the model. And most haven't been dealing with how you actually build a movement—a locally based movement, contrary to the base of power, with people's assemblies. They haven't looked at that seriously.

If you look at the elections as the starting point and criticize what was supposed to be done, you're gonna wind up falling short. And mostly in Dallas, Austin, Atlanta you're just wasting your

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time. In my opinion, you're wasting your time even trying to be involved in electoral politics, just given the nature of those cities as hubs for capital on a global scale. Trying to play in that arena and those areas, you have to amass a certain amount of resources that the movement in no formal fashion has the ability to generate, so you automatically enter

alliances with those capitalist forces without being able to dictate terms, and instead they dictate them to you.

Our forces may not hold Jackson for much longer. In Jackson, the basic formula was that people power could outweigh money, could outweigh capital. In part because of the size, because of the history of struggle and just because of the reactionary nature of the damn Republicans and the Tea Party and all their support for white supremacy of the Republicans. That's very visceral in Jackson, in ways that are foreign or new in places like Austin where there is a liberal demeanor to being the progressive city of Texas, the blue bubble. You can't do that. Our thing was that we could put more people in the street and outweigh the influence of money. The way that this new alliance formed and our actions changed the game, that may not be true in the future. Folks have to be prepared for that.

The main thing that folks need to be trying to focus on is to look at the model. How do you build a real solid base in the working class? The strength of the model is really building the people's assemblies and this autonomous economic development of a solidarity economy and cooperatives. Those are things that folks need to concentrate on, not the electoral stuff. That winds up being the historic picture of what's going on.

**If you're gonna pursue that shit what are you pursuing it for? Because there is only a limited number of things under the present confines – the capitalist imperialist system – which the bourgeoisie control, that you can win. People should pay close attention and not get confused about what they are trying to do.**

Chokwe Lumumba did not have power, he just won an election. Understand what the state is and understand what you can do with these offices in the cities if you hold or control them. Holding office isn't the point because under empire they are going to control you. Understand the limited objectives you are pursuing in a place like Birmingham or a comparable city. It may make some sense there. But in the larger sense of things, building the independent power base outside of it is what needs to happen in Austin, Galveston, New Orleans, places like that. Just be clear about what the model is and what it means. And for us that was just meant to move a certain point and certain aspects of the agenda forward.

Some of the things we were trying to accomplish by Chokwe being in office: we were trying to make it so that coops would be kind of legal, to give us more democratic space. We wanted to move to create some policies in the city to make it a zero waste city to promote social responsibility from the collective. We'd be able to do that stuff. If you're gonna pursue that shit what are you pursuing it for? Because there is only a limited number of things under the present confines – the capitalist imperialist system – which the bourgeoisie control, that you can win. People should pay close attention and not get confused about what they are trying to do.

Most of the folks I've encountered have put us in this little mix of Kshama Sawant, who was elected up in Seattle to city council. I think that's the wrong read on what's going on. It misses that we haven't done enough yet to transform and organize the base for that to be anything but an episodic piece. We don't want folks to confuse the actual base with the organizing. Our people are still primary, we still haven't moved past that point by any stretch of the imagination. We still have a lot of work to do and that's what folks needs to be concentrating on.

#### Footnotes

1. ↑ **The Kush refers to region in the US, which encompasses areas of Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia and South Carolina.**
2. ↑ **A historic revolutionary nationalist organization that fought for a separate Black socialist republic in the U.S. South.**
3. ↑ **Vision 2022 is an extremely ambitious development plan heralded by the chamber of commerce, which will force rapid gentrification.**
4. ↑ **Haley Barbour's the former Republican governor of the state of Mississippi.**
5. ↑ **Senior Senator from Mississippi and member of the Republican Party.**

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