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Getting to the Roots of Liberation

An interview with Dan Berger

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As radicals, we often speak about the need to go to the root of the problem. We put forward critique after critique about what's wrong in the world. We present the facts and frameworks for why we need fundamental change in this society. We are against patriarchy, white supremacy, heterosexism, authoritarianism and imperialism. We build communities of resistance around shared analysis of the problems. What about being rooted in solutions, in history, in traditions and communities? Activists who are white often struggle to understand our connections to our communities and histories. We have a hard time imagining what it means to be rooted – heart, mind and soul – in something we're for rather than against. To be in the streets with thousands of individuals against Bush is far less powerful for me than to be with groups of dozens united behind shared politics of what we are for. Building communities and organizations of millions united in shared vision and concrete programs to get there is the work of left/radicals.

Dan Berger is a younger generation left/radical dedicated to growing and strengthening roots to liberation. He helped launch the anarchist newspaper Onward out of Florida in 2000, to create space for the global justice movement to reflect on its actions and develop its political analysis. He's developed relationships with older generation movement veterans, including political prisoners, to learn lessons from history and help create intergeneration dialogue.

He's working on book about the Weather Underground to draw out lessons from their history and strategy. He's also collecting letters from younger activists to publish as a book to open up multi-generational communication in the movement. He now lives in Philadelphia and recently joined Resistance 'n Brooklyn, a white anti-imperialist group based in New York City. He's committed to anti-racist, multiracial, feminist organizing practice and speaks openly about his process of learning to honestly engage this work.

CC: How did you get involved with left/radical politics and activism?

DB: I used to answer this question by saying I got involved through animal rights and expanded from there. There is truth to that, but in recent years I've come to understand the significant role my family upbringing played. I grew up in Syracuse, New York, in a very (Ashkenazi) Jewish-identified household. My dad is a professor of Holocaust studies, my mom is Israeli, and my mom's parents were both survivors of the Nazi Holocaust. I never met my grandfather, but my grandmother, who was in Auschwitz, has been a central figure to my life. She just passed away recently, and it's been hard to deal with it. Words like genocide and oppression were common place growing up at Seders and on Shabbat dinners. That environment has been instrumental in shaping my worldview and my political understanding.

Despite this background, being raised in a white suburban middle class environment in postindustrial U.S.A., oppression was viewed largely as being in the past. My first activism began

1970s so powerful is that people had hope that they could make change, even revolutionary change, in their lifetime. So they were willing to put their bodies on the line in a variety of projects. We need to continue that same hopeful spirit, recognize the contributions of those that have gone before us as we build movements to topple imperialism.

when I was 14 and went vegetarian and then vegan. The animal rights group in Syracuse at the time was coming under some heavy repression from local police and FBI, so I was politicized also about state repression of activists as much as by concern over animals.

I moved to South Florida the same year I got into politics and began organizing there. Being new to activism, I didn't quite know what to do, especially in a place as opulent and depressing as Boca Raton. In retrospect, I learned a lot just by doing, though I had significant help from friends and comrades. In particular, my best friend Eugene Koveos, who I grew up with, was instrumental in introducing me to anti-racist feminism of people like bell hooks, which was so helpful to me. Being able to connect to a broader movement even through revolutionary writings was important in isolated Florida.

In the animal rights movement at the time, there was a lot of talk of uniting different struggles, but few connections were really being made. Of the links that were actually made, most revolved around the predominantly white radical environmental movement. I was among a small core of folks, predominantly women, who were pushing in national movement debate to have a broader analysis of the world. I wasn't leading the charge, but trying to support the work of women comrades, people like my dear friend Heather La Capria, as they challenged oppression in the movement. This generally meant trying to raise issues of group process in regards to sexism (e.g. who did the grunt work and who was the celebrity) as well as broad political objectives (it's not okay to vote for reactionary Republicans just because they're nice to animals). This agitation, though, did not win us many friends; there was a lot of red-baiting in the movement, and commitment was measured by how many times you had been arrested – in addition to a heavy focus on “purity” (a scary thought, if your ancestors were killed in purification attempts) and in general a great reluctance to struggle around issues of power and privilege. I left

the animal rights movement whereas most women comrades I knew were forced out and have since moved on to other things.

My last hurrah with animal rights came in 1999, during my senior year of high school, when I organized a conference – the first conference I went to. It was called the Total Liberation Conference, and was an attempt to bridge animal, human, and environmental liberation movements. In retrospect, it was more an “other issues 101” kind of conference for animal rights and Earth First! activists. Nevertheless, it was something quiet, conservative Boca had never seen, and it scared them. The state came down on the conference pretty hard – the university where it was scheduled cancelled a day before the conference was slated to take place. Then the cops shut down our first back-up location, effectively canceling the first night by stopping, searching, threatening and otherwise harassing activists who came to the park. The only person physically threatened was the speaker from the American Indian Movement, one of the few people of color there, who Feds threatened to shoot, and then followed until he left town. (Thankfully, he still came back the next day to speak.) It was a very intense time for me, and quite an education in the politics of repression. It was also a good lesson in organizing; despite having speakers from AIM and MOVE, the conference was almost all white. How I reached out to people and who I reached out to was very limiting. Being criticized for creating such a white conference under the name “total liberation” was a challenging but utterly important process for me.

After the conference I moved to Gainesville, a much more happening place politically at that time. (Since then, South Florida activism has grown and expanded, and I’ve also become much more aware of the fabulous organizing by working class people of color that has been going on there for years but I did not know how to find in high school, such as the Miami Workers Center and Power U.) Shortly after arriving in Gainesville, I got involved in a planning committee

– including across town, in the Black or Puerto Rican neighborhoods and in other communities of color. Our struggles should really be shaped by what these communities and movements are doing, taking the lead from their impressive work and trying to build connections with and accountability to them.

We need to build relationships that challenge power, and we need to start yesterday! It’s not enough to try and build relationships among and between different communities when the crisis happens. Those relationships are by design short-lived and largely ineffectual. I think this lesson applies to everyone, but here I want to speak specifically to white activists. We have to work on these relationships, building accountability and trust based on fighting oppression and building justice. In the course of building these relationships and doing this work, we also need to build movements where comrades take care of each other and value emotions in our political work.

I think it’s critical that we understand what it really means to confront empire. What does it take to hold an empire together? How can it be dismantled? It won’t be by any one strategy or any one tactic, nor will it come without recognizing the race of empire, the gender of empire, the sexuality of empire. There’s a lot of theorizing now on how different systems of oppression (race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and so on) intersect and bolster each other. That’s a real contribution that we need to continue putting at the center of our work. We also need to make sure that we’re constantly moving forward with that broad analysis, always looking for ways to organize in a way that confronts all aspects of the ruling order, which requires a willingness to take risks and make mistakes – and learn from them. It sounds cliché, but it’s a lot harder than it seems.

More people are probably active now than ever before; February 15, 2003, was the largest worldwide protest ever. That’s an incredible accomplishment. But there’s less of a sense of an overall movement than I think there was two generations ago. Part of what I think makes the 1960s and

old age of 23, but I find myself far less attached to the label anarchist than I once was. I suppose some critics of Onward will say I never was one, but I've really learned the importance of learning from others. I always say that some of my favorite anarchist thinkers are people who wouldn't identify as an anarchist (e.g. Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Arundhati Roy, etc.), and we need to think about why that is. If we're talking about doing this for the long haul, we need to institute structures to learn from older activists and mentor younger activists. Political and generational differences are bound to come up, and I think lots of perspectives have validity. For instance, in doing research on the Weather Underground and other groups from the 1960s and 1970s, it's been really incredible to see how much these groups valued studying – these people read movement history and theory from all over the world! As a result, they were able to look rather concretely at what has made revolutions fail or succeed. It's hard to think of a more valuable lesson. There is real power in the process of endless learning, teaching, mentoring.

A major lesson, of course, is of the need to fight privilege and oppression in all their forms. Radicals of yesterday are to be congratulated for the seriousness with which they took the struggle against white supremacy in particular; I've found a certain palpability that is inspiring when hearing former Weather members talk about fighting racism. There was also a strong current of internationalism, where people were aware of and felt connected to international developments in a very visceral way. I don't think we have that as much now, when a lot of the anti-war slogans revolve around dead U.S. soldiers (which is real and tragic) but much less about all the dead Iraqis (and Afghans and others). In another example, some sectors of the global justice movement have championed the importance of confronting the powerful financial institutions but are less rooted in grassroots struggles against globalization in Haiti, Mexico, Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia and elsewhere

for a statewide May Day celebration, and spent the next nine months organizing for a big march through downtown Gainesville, complete with a rally highlighting some workers' struggles then going on. In terms of stated objectives, May Day was a great success, though it was still rather white in its organizing approach, and women comrades later raised criticisms of sexism in the weekend campout prior to the march and rally. Three days later, another key organizer of May Day, Rob Augman, called to talk about starting a newspaper that would build off the excitement of May Day and the global justice demonstrations. We talked for awhile about ideas, and Onward was born that night.

CC: You were an editor of Onward for two-and-a-half years. Can you share your thinking behind the newspaper and what you tried to accomplish through it?

DB: Onward came out of and was heavily inspired by the global justice movement – internationally, nationally, and locally. The protests against the WTO in Seattle and against the World Bank and IMF in Washington D.C. in April 2000 (where I was a part of a 34-person affinity group from Gainesville) were very inspiring to the Gainesville left and young activists throughout Florida. The May Day rally and other organizing projects in the South in general and Florida in particular were also galvanizing. Originally, Onward was going to be a Florida-specific paper, to give more representation to a region largely ignored by the movement. (I think that the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in southwest Florida and Project South in Atlanta, among others, have done a tremendous job in recent years of showing the country how amazing organizing in the South can be.) But we quickly decided that anarchists were playing a major role in the global justice movement, and we didn't see a real movement paper in existence, so the focus became national/international, rather than regional, although we always tried to support organizing in Florida and elsewhere in the South.

The paper prided itself as being modern “anarchist news, opinion, theory, and strategy,” and I think we lived up to that. In addition to providing news of struggles and movements the world over, we specifically wanted to create space for people to discuss ways to strengthen organizing and examine problems within the movement. To do that, we included a lot of articles about anti-racism, direct democracy, women’s liberation, and queer liberation. After Sept. 11, we produced a special anti-war issue and tried to bridge links between the global justice and emerging anti-war movements. Our main goal was to produce something that, while hopefully appealing to a broad audience, would be relevant to grassroots activists and organizers. In other words, we weren’t producing an academic journal but a paper to help build the movement, sharpen our analysis, reflect on our organizing, and support ongoing political projects that were serving to mobilize people to confront the state and oppression. We took a strong position that anarchists in particular needed to think about organization, leadership, privilege, and solidarity. We actually got some flak for that position, as well as for our support for non-anarchist political prisoners and general non-sectarian approach to the paper.

We weren’t just journalists; we were activists. We read and participated in movement debate and local organizing around mass mobilizations, grassroots projects, and building anti-imperialist, pro-democracy, and anti-oppression tenets within anarchism. We did this through our local organizing as well as through our dialogue. I think the paper reflected a lot of what people were thinking and discussing at the time. There were lots of discussions in the global justice and anarchist movements about the relationship of local/community organizing to mass mobilizations and about how privilege and oppression shape our organizing. We not only took our own positions on those debates, but we encouraged the movement to discuss them more seriously and have the debate shape our organizing. Unfortunately, Onward is no more. Internal

out, it’s easy to not draw lines when perhaps you should. The other thing I want to say is that I agree that struggles need to account for emotions, and that men are specifically taught to suppress emotions. And there’s a need to interrogate our own abusive and coercive behavior; without being grounded in feelings, men’s groups can often revert to mere intellectual debates. So I’m not saying it’s wrong for men to do the work of getting in touch with our feelings. I think if men did more long-term anti-sexist work (both for internal processing as well as doing organizing) without just waiting for the crisis to hit, we’d be in a much better place to deal with the crisis in an accountable way.

In being close to survivors and to radical feminist women, I’ve been very lucky to learn things I wouldn’t have otherwise heard. Initially, I used my closeness to these women as a way to avoid examining my own behavior and the pressing need for men to work with other men in fighting sexual violence. This thinking also enabled me to press the eject button on anyone I thought didn’t measure up to my high standards. But just as there are no exemplary whites who are above racism, there are no non-transgender men free from male privilege. I’m spending a lot of time these days thinking about how pro-feminist men can best support survivors of all genders while working to end sexual assault and interrogate our own abusive or coercive behavior.

CC: From all of the work you’ve been part of, your relationships with movement veterans and your study of past social movements, how do you think about strategy and vision today?

DB: Obviously, that’s a huge question, and I’d be wary of anyone who claims to have the answer. I’ll try and offer some broad lessons here – but you’ll have to buy the book to read more of my thoughts!

I think we all have a lot to learn, and there’s no one right way to learn. Perhaps I’m becoming more mellow at the ripe

their daily life and in projects. I wouldn't say that I've done anything that spectacular in organizing against assault. I've been a part of efforts to hold sexual assaulters accountable, and I sadly feel that I have yet to be a part of a successful effort at this, made more difficult by the fact that I'm not exactly sure what full accountability for sexual assault would look like. Of the incidents I've worked on, most have fallen apart during the impromptu men's groups formed to hold male abusers accountable. While there is a need for men to deal directly and emotionally with how we're tangled in a system of patriarchy, men's groups I've been in have almost always fallen apart in disgrace because they tended to deflect the political motivations in favor of process work. In retrospect, I think part of the problem is that these men's groups were formed in crisis mode, so we were trying to deal with a specific instance of assault while also trying for the first time to work collectively as men at unpacking all the baggage of being a man, which brought up big issues (as it should). But because we were in crisis mode already, there was little accountability to women, some men wanted to focus more exclusively on how they/we are hurt by patriarchy, women felt like we were then avoiding our duties, and the group fell apart. A similar process happened more than once.

I should add two things: first, I'm self-critical of my own involvement in these groups, for giving up too easily on other men when I should have struggled more. I believe there are definitely instances when lines are drawn and people need to choose sides; supporting a serial abuser who has shown no interest in accountability is not especially progressive. But neither is dismissing people due to the difficulty of struggling over privilege. That's simply a luxury we can't afford, if we're going to move forward. Growing up in a toxic society has infected us all, and we need to recognize how deeply we internalize violent or manipulative behaviors. It's easy to draw lines when you don't have to – and, when it's your friend being called

problems prevented the paper from continuing as it was, and attempts to have a new collective produce it proved futile. I have my critiques, but on the whole, I think we did a good job at filling a void in the movement. I hope others are able to carry that spirit forward without repeating our mistakes.

CC: You helped start a Colors of Resistance group in Gainesville. What was the group, what was your strategy and what lessons stay with you from it?

DB: As you know, Colours of Resistance started as a Web-based phenomenon in Canada and the United States to inject anti-oppression politics (specifically, multiracial, anti-racist feminism, queer liberation, anti-capitalism) into the growing global justice movement. On the Web, Colours specifically spells out the need for leadership from oppressed communities, especially people of color and women (See www.colours.mahost.org).

In Gainesville, the Colors of Resistance chapter (we dropped the 'u' so as not to confuse people) started after a string of oppressive events at the University of Florida campus. In a two-week time period, a woman was almost raped on campus (her pepper spray enabled her to get away), with no sort of administrative or media concern; the LGBT group on campus had a banner defaced and then destroyed; a fraternity had a party sanctioned by the university where men were to dress as U.S. soldiers and women were to dress as Vietnamese prostitutes; and, finally, someone vandalized the Institute for Hispanic and Latino Culture with a racist epithet in response to a Latino man running for student body president.

These incidents, especially because they happened so close to each other and because the university administration's response was so terrible yet typical, really epitomized the connections between racism, sexism, and homophobia. My friend Guillermo Rebollo-Gil, an amazing Puerto Rican poet and brilliant activist, and I had been talking about organizing for awhile, and this seemed like the right time. Joined by

the incredible talents of Jessica Hardy and Lula Dawit, COR was born as a collective, always at least half people of color and half women. We did workshops on white anti-racism, men against sexism, and prisons; took on the university administration and fraternities via well-attended and critical panel discussions as well as through propaganda; and tried to build an explicitly anti-racist and pro-feminist politics at the University of Florida and in the Gainesville left. COR was also coming off a successful campaign Guillermo, Jessica and I were actively involved in against the university's attempt to move its predominantly Black and female custodial staff to night shift.

As the four of us each left Gainesville, COR no longer exists, but there were many lessons I take from the group. One in particular I learned is the importance of Southern radical organizing. Whenever I tell the story to people outside the South of what led to the founding of COR, people always gasp when I explain the terrible incidents that led to its founding. And yes, there's no denying how disturbing and oppressive these things are. But the implication is always that it must be terrible to live in the South because other places don't have that kind of problem. That's such nonsense; the South has a particular history that needs to be analyzed and understood, and oppression may manifest itself differently there (maybe), but the same kinds of oppressions and visibly oppressive acts occur in New York, California, Illinois, and wherever else. The South also has a rich history of radicalism and is a strategic place for community organizing, not a place to be maligned. The disparaging of the U.S. South as politically backward in some ways correlates to a more imperialist worldview that the Global South is backward, in my opinion.

COR also underscored to me the importance of having a broad, holistic analysis of oppression – and how deeply embedded systems of domination are in each of us. Even as we sought to take on the university for its racism and sexism, we

the fall of 2005, published by the worker-owned collective left publisher, AK Press.

I'm actually working on another book, an edited anthology with my friends Chesa Boudin and Kenyon Farrow. That one is called Letters From Young Activists and is an attempt to showcase the work and brilliance of young(er) activists today. It will also be out in the fall of 2005, published by the fine folks at Nation Books.

CC: You've done a lot of work with survivors of sexual assault. What struggles have you gone through doing that work? Also, why has this work been important to you as a man?

DB: Sexual assault is a huge issue within the movement, as women activists have repeatedly underscored. And it's something that isn't talked about, let alone dealt with, nearly enough – in part, I think, because the difficult process of accountability tends to frighten people and is itself so hard to define. Whether it's developing codes of conduct or community meetings or something else altogether, we need to more consciously and consistently find ways to curb sexual assault – to build sexual relationships that are healthy, loving, accountable. My awareness of sexual assault comes from being one of the only people I know who is not a survivor. The majority of my close friends – men, women, transgender people – are survivors of some form of sexual abuse. Some were abused by strangers or non-activist acquaintances, but more than a few were assaulted by people (usually men) who were supposedly activists. More people are talking about dealing with sexual assault online and in zines and papers, which is good. But there still needs to be more discussion and action. Sexual assault is a major crisis for our movement, and it's something that needs to be dealt with; I can think of several people who have pushed out of activist circles for the way sexual assault has been mishandled.

In terms of my own work, the work I'm most proud of is more individual – trying to support individual survivors in

longest held political prisoners in the world.) My relationship with David Gilbert is yielding a book.

CC: Tell us about your book. What is it and why are you writing it?

DB: The book is basically a history of the Weather Underground and the rise of white anti-imperialism, starting with its emergence in Students for a Democratic Society (in relation to Black Power) all the way up through and including David's arrest in 1981, five weeks before I was born, as a white ally to the Black Liberation Army. In writing this history, I hope to get at some of the fundamentals of what solidarity means and what lessons the Weather Underground has to offer today's movements. When I started writing David in the late 1990s, there was very little information on the group. There's more out now, but nothing I've come across has really told the history in relation to Third World liberation movements (domestically and internationally) and to draw out the lessons. Within that goal, there are some sub-themes – but the guiding question is, what does solidarity mean? What does it mean to be a white anti-imperialist? How can we apply the lessons from yesterday to today's struggles-when imperialism is in resurgence and revolutionary movements are in abeyance? There are no easy answers, of course, but it's a fun, if exhausting, project.

My reason for writing the book is pretty basic: there are lots of references to the Weather Underground, but there's little that analyzes what the group was, did, and tried to do, even though most young(er) activists are aware of the group. No doubt, the Weather Underground had enormous problems as well – sectarianism, sexism, commandism, and other problems impacting much of the U.S. left in the 1970s – so my goal is far from an uncritical celebration. Instead, I'm trying to write something that will be helpful to activists, young(er) ones in particular, as they/we seek to learn the lessons from history to enable us to fight for the future. It should be available in

had internal difficulties with our own racism and our own sexism. And it was such an incredible learning experience to be in that environment and really struggle with it, to learn the broad reaches and current manifestations of colonialism.

Coming into COR, I had no real experience in anti-racist work that was explicitly multiracial, so I initially approached COR with a static, one-size-fits-all mode of thinking around white anti-racism. But that experience showed me how important it is to really meet people where they are at and challenge our own dogmatism. COR formed organically out of almost incidental relationships being built. I had wanted to be a part of something like COR for a long time, yet there's a reason it took several years to develop. People had to learn to trust each other – to trust me that I was committed to this work and willing to follow through. It's not sexy, but building relationships is arguably the most important part of building movements.

Related to that, I must say that COR really bred in me the need for thinking about our vision. COR was a multiracial, anti-racist group; many anti-racist groups these days (and historically) are either autonomous people of color groups or all-white groups and I think these formations serve important purposes, as long as white groups have a structure of accountability. Regardless of the organizational forms, I think we need to understand that our vision is both multiracial and anti-racist, and we need to try to incorporate that into our lives as much as possible – what organizations we work in and with, who we relate to, what books we read, how we define activism; all these issues must be shaped by an anti-racist (and pro-feminist) vision. The sense of entitlement that comes with privilege – the belief that we alone deserve to set the full political agenda – is something that needs to be constantly challenged, lest activism, even among self-proclaimed white anti-racists be an excuse to build white power.

CC: You've been doing work with U.S. political prisoners, particularly David Gilbert, for years now. What has

that looked like and what have you learned from that work?

DB: While, of all the political prisoners I have written with, I have the closest relationship with David, I do want to give special attention, thanks, and respect to all the political prisoners currently in captivity for building the kind of movements we struggle for today. I'm thinking of people like Mumia Abu Jamal, Debbie Africa and other MOVE prisoners, Herman Bell, Veronza Bower, Jaan Laaman, Oscar Lopez Riveria, Sekou Odinga, Leonard Peltier, Mutulu Shakur, and so many others; these are our comrades, and they deserve freedom. In particular, I'd like to send love and appreciation to those political prisoners who, in addition to David, have played an important role in how I understand the world: Sundiata Acoli, Marilyn Buck, and Jalil Muntaqim.

Just recently, Ray Luc Levasseur was released from prison after twenty years inside. Ray was part of the United Freedom Front, a group of white anti-imperialists that did a string of bombings in the 1970s and 1980s against U.S. government and corporate support for apartheid South Africa and death squads in Central America, in addition to racist oppression in this country. He is an eloquent writer and the first political prisoner I wrote with. He's someone that first opened my eyes to both the responsibility and the possibility of resisting empire. His release from prison is a wonderful boost to our movement.

I began writing with political prisoners around the time of the Total Liberation Conference, as part of looking for mentors to help me understand what my role as a white Jewish man from a middle class background could play in radical struggle. I viewed it as a way to learn history, but more importantly, a way to think about the present and discuss with long-time activists organizing tips and strategies. I feel like I learned a great deal from all the political prisoners I've written with – about race and racism, about what it means to confront the state, about the

importance of reflecting your politics in your personal interactions, about being attuned to current struggles, about avoiding sectarianism, about what it means to say the struggle is forever. We need to be ever vigilant to get the remaining ones back on the streets, where they belong.

Working on Onward, we received some criticism for regularly printing a list of political prisoners and printing articles by them. The critics said that because many of the political prisoners we were supporting weren't anarchists, we were betraying the movement, even betraying ourselves. It was a rather ridiculous argument, really. It basically said that due to the history of communists killing anarchists, no one who calls herself a communist should be trusted. It was fighting sectarianism with sectarianism. Such an argument misses the fact that many of these political prisoners and prisoners of war share our political values and any differences offer important possibilities to engage, learn, dialogue. It's important to support political prisoners because, as anarchist prisoner of war Bill Dunne said, people aren't going to join a movement if they feel like they'll be left high and dry when things get rough.

In terms of what the actual support work for political prisoners looks like, I correspond with several prisoners on a regular basis. Writing (and visiting, if possible) is arguably one of the most basic yet most important things people can do. The people locked down are still activists; they still want and deserve a connection to broader social movements. Some prisoners, particularly the Black/New Afrikan ones, are in much more need of financial support, which can be as simple as them sending postal money orders for a few bucks. Support work has also entailed making copies, sending out flyers, organizing events, publicizing and distributing their writings, and keeping the existence of political prisoners inside the United States front and center in organizing and strategizing. Also, of course, some of these people are coming up for parole and need our support (Jalil Muntaqim and Sundiata Acoli, for instance – two of the