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Black Comeback

An interview with Kai Lumumba Barrow

L.A. Kauffman

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What if there was a revolution and nobody noticed?

OK, "revolution" is too grand a term, but the event in question is undeniably historic: the creation, in the United States, of a direct-action-based alliance across racial lines, between the predominantly white movement against corporate globalization and the predominantly people of color movement against criminal injustice.

You won't read about it in the mainstream media, but then, they didn't see Seattle coming either. More troubling is how little discussion there seems to be in radical and progressive circles about this nascent alliance: its necessity, potential, and pitfalls.

Kai Lumumba Barrow has been a major figure behind the recent resurgence of direct action within movements of color. She works fulltime as an organizer for SLAM!, the Student Liberation Action Movement, based in the City University of New York, especially Manhattan's Hunter College. Since the mid-Nineties, SLAM! has been a pioneering activist force on the East Coast, mobilizing working-class students of color in a series of savvy and daring campaigns for educational access, economic justice, and other issues.

This past summer, SLAM! brought the largely white New York City Direct Action Network (NYC-DAN) and other groups together to plan a joint action against the Republican Party Convention in Philadelphia, focused on questions of criminal injustice. The process was a bumpy one – in particular, there was resistance within NYC-DAN to what some felt was a turn away from the group’s focus on corporate globalization, resistance that many activists of color viewed as racist – but the coalition held, and holds to this day.

In this frank and wide-ranging interview, Kai Lumumba Barrow places this development within a broad historical context, focusing particularly on the troubled state of the black liberation movement over the last 25 years and its current revitalization. She sheds light both on why African-American radicals moved away from direct-action protest beginning in the mid 1960s, and why she and other activists of color are experimenting with it anew today.

Kai Lumumba Barrow: I was raised by a black nationalist family, so I came to activist struggles early. It’s difficult for me to say when I was politicized, because it seems like it’s always been there. But I guess probably ’68, the Democratic Convention, stands out for me.

I was born and raised in Chicago. My parents were involved in various organizations and we lived in a co-op building where a lot of Panthers and Yippies and so forth came and stayed during the Convention. I was about 10, and I remember feeling close to some of the folks who were staying in our house before the Convention began. You know, you’re a kid, and you’re the homeowner’s kid, so you get a special kind of attention. People were nice to me, and I felt they were my friends.

So when Daley turned his pigs on the people, and the people came back to the house, bleeding and beat up, I felt personally hurt. I felt like, they did this to my friends.

After that I read Malcolm X, and I wanted a revolution. That’s it, I thought, we’re going to do this. In high school, I was a knucklehead:

saying no, this is genocide, and we’re building a movement. I worry about globalization issues knocking that out of the box.

That’s why I think the predominantly white anti-globalization movement has got to engage in a domestic analysis of corporate globalization and what effect it has on disenfranchised communities of color. The movement against corporate globalization has to engage in an ongoing analysis about race and imperialism, and how they play out in the United States, or else it will completely undermine our work and continue to propel a racist and classist system.

That’s why I wanted to really look at how we could unite with the Direct Action Network, or build a parallel alliance or network of people of color that were focused on issues that affect people of color, and unite the two major issues - corporate globalization and criminal injustice - as a place that we can spring from.

People were overwhelmingly supportive. Nobody said, "Oh, they shouldn't have thrown the rock at the Starbucks." (laughter)

But, in terms of their weaknesses, Seattle, D.C. - even Philly and L.A. - these mass convergences require a week's worth of time in order to participate, dollars in order to travel, support. If a whole group of people go somewhere for a week, there's a whole lot of work that's not getting done, and who's going to do it? Whether that's taking care of the children, or working 9 to 5. It's very difficult for people of color, even young people of color, young working-class people of color, to participate in mass convergences.

I thought Seattle was a great experiment, and it was great that labor came out. But there was clearly a class distinction between the people who organized and participated in Seattle versus where I come from. Access to cell phones? Please, we're just getting walkie-talkies. The utilization of technology, organizing on the Internet: What's that phrase, the digital divide? It's there. Make no mistake about it, it's there.

So the organizing and the building for that action clearly indicated that an intelligentsia, a bourgeois class, had organized it. They had the equipment, they had the contacts. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it's really important to acknowledge that.

So to some degree, I thought it was great to see it, and I felt really heartened that people were in the streets. I also felt disconnected, and I felt envious - player hate. (laughter) I felt like, you know, why don't we have the resources to do this kind of work?

If we look at the Vietnam War protests, we see how those protests - because of a capacity to utilize the system, and money, and resources - tended to overtake and co-opt the black liberation movement, the American Indian Movement, the Chicano movement and the Puerto Rican movement. I'm worried that this network of people doing direct action around corporate globalism is going to do the same thing to emerging movements around criminal injustice. These are issues where people of color are

conscious, but not active. But I went to college thinking, this is where the revolution is going to happen. I went to a historically black university in Atlanta, and I was really taken aback: It was the Carter years, and Reagan was beginning to show his ugly head, and there was no movement.

COINTELPRO had done a serious job on the Panther Party and then also the Black Liberation Army. There was underground stuff happening but it was way, way submerged. There wasn't any real movement specifically in black communities any more. And I was on this campus with the bourgeoisie, the black bourgeoisie, and I was really freaked out. Like, what is going on? (laughter)

But then I got active around anti-apartheid work, building student organizations on campus, and doing a lot of work at that time around Assata Shakur and Joanne Little and other political prisoners.

I also became a member of the Republic of New Africa, whose full name was the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa. It focused on establishing a nation for black people in five states in the South. Doing a lot of institution-building, in that sense. We started a school, a Saturday school, did a lot of political prisoner work, and a lot of political education work. Training and that sort of thing.

I stayed with that in different capacities for several years. I went back to Chicago and started doing a lot of police brutality work there, still doing prisoner support work, and ended up here in New York in the early 90s, still staying with the same issues, around police brutality and prison work.

LAK: In the U.S., the tactics and techniques of direct action were really pioneered by the black freedom movement of the Fifties and Sixties, but by the early Seventies, those tactics are rarely seen in movements of color, especially in black movements. How did that come to be?

KLB: There was a major shift in the political expression of the black liberation movement in the mid-Sixties. I have recollections

of looking at the civil rights movement, Dr. King, and the dogs and that sort of thing, and I have recollections of my family saying, Why are they allowing themselves to be beaten and attacked by these pigs, by these racist pigs? Why are they not fighting back?

So there were two predominant tendencies regarding which way forward for our people. It's reductionist to say it, but it was primarily Malcolm X versus Dr. King, and you choose your camp. And I tended to be in the Malcolm X camp - still do, frankly.

The Black Panther Party, as the heirs of Malcolm X, said we're not going to just stand by idly, we're going to utilize self-defense in order to get our movement forward. And at that time the Party did engage in a lot of direct action, from taking over the state capitol in California - that was a direct action - to various activities that were going on in communities around the country.

Now, though, the black liberation movement is at a really crucial stage in its development. We've seen a lot of our leadership and a lot of our comrades killed and imprisoned and driven crazy, exiled, because we stood up against oppression. And at this point there seems to be a reassessing of which way we should we go. We've engaged in a critique around the standard leadership model, the hierarchical leadership model; we've done a critique around the party model; we've done a critique around every possible model that we know exists, and at this point we're in the process of rebuilding.

So as a people, within different movements, we've been stunned to some degree for a really long time. Since the early to mid Seventies. I think the experiment with armed struggle models, underground models, hit us really hard. The Party as a large movement kind of stopped at that point. There have been smatterings of different things that have occurred since then, but I don't think we've really been able to capture the imagination of our communities in any broad way since that period.

So we've been kind of in this stalemate, and I think what's happening is that we're starting to look back to, well, the Fifties. (laugh-

ter) This dawned on me maybe about a year or so ago, and I was really pissed. I was like, damn it, we're going backwards. (laughter)

So we're starting to reassess the utilization of direct action and civil disobedience, but we're coming at it, I think, more militantly than in the Fifties. We've seen it as a way to engage more of our community. Primarily what we've been doing since the Seventies is rallies and permitted protests and those sort of things, that have been more or less non-confrontational. I think we're starting to say, wait a minute. We've been using a multitude of non-confrontational tactics, and I think at this point some of us are starting to escalate some of the tactics that we're utilizing, understanding that we're also the most victimized by the state for participating in those tactics.

We took the position in the past that nonviolent civil disobedience placed us in a very passive position, so we started engaging in armed struggle or at least self-defense. We didn't have enough experience with that perhaps, or we didn't have enough support for that, and we were beat. We were beat pretty badly.

We're trying to come back from that, get it together and figure out how we're going to move forward. Taking the best of both self-defense and militancy while still being accountable to our communities.

LAK: What were your feelings about Seattle when it happened?

KLB: Why the hell am I in New York at a SLAM! meeting? I had planned to go - I was so mad!

For all the obvious reasons, I thought it was great. I was really disappointed by the coverage - I don't know if there were more people of color in Seattle than the none I saw in the media.

The morning after, my partner and I were on the train, reading the paper. And we were smiling and high fiving each other. I lived at the time in Bed Stuy, so the train was filled with black folks - and everybody was smiling. (laughter) I had some good conversations with a couple of folks on the train, about how this is necessary, and it's about time, and this reminds me of the old days.