

A Southern Strategy for Bring the Ruckus

Ruckus Collective

2005

Contents

| | |
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| The Centrality of the South | 3 |
| The South's Potential | 4 |
| We Start in Atlanta | 4 |
| The Next Great Southern Freedom Movement | 5 |

We propose that Bring the Ruckus's political strategy for the next two years should:

1. Prioritize building movements in the South that fit or approximate the Six Criteria, particularly against prisons and the police.
2. Prioritize building Ruckus in the South, starting in Atlanta and moving from there to build several locals throughout the South.

The organization should give this a political and financial precedence within Ruckus. It should also encourage and help Ruckus members move to Atlanta. The short-term goal of this proposal is to create a functioning local in Atlanta and to participate in its political work, including but not limited to the Grassroots Prison Campaign and Communities United. The medium-term goal of this proposal is to create several locals throughout the South working on prison and police issues. The long-term goal of this proposal is to ensure that Ruckus is part of revolutionary movements in the South. Due to the South's strategic position, the attack on white supremacy there will enhance revolutionary possibilities nationwide. We propose that Ruckus make this commitment for at least two years, after which it will be reevaluated by the membership.

The following analysis was written by the authors of the southern strategy proposal, Dan Horowitz de Garcia and Joel Olson. It accompanied the southern strategy proposal, which was passed by Bring the Ruckus; however, not all BTR members are in agreement with this analysis, and it should not be considered the stance of BTR as an organization, but rather Dan and Joel as individual members.

The Centrality of the South

The South is the key to building a revolutionary movement in the United States.

American political institutions were created with deference to slaveholders' interests. Forget the small vs. big state debate in your civics textbooks: the Senate was created to give equal representation to all states in order to give the South effective control over half of Congress. The tacit agreement was that the House of Representatives (in which representation is based on a state's population) would be predominantly Northern, while the South would exercise power via the filibuster in the Senate.

Eleven of the first sixteen presidents were Southerners. Southerners controlled the federal judiciary. The Democratic Party was built on an alliance between Southern slaveholders and Northern workers. After the Civil War, the South used its filibuster power in the Senate to block civil rights legislation. Since Nixon, the South has been central to the Republicans' national strategy. The GOP's "Southern Strategy," developed by Nixon strategist Kevin Phillips, deliberately used racial appeals to attract white Southerners away from the Democrats. The result is that the "Solid South" has gone from overwhelmingly Democratic to overwhelmingly Republican in twenty years. This explains why presidential election strategy starts in the South: Nixon, Reagan, Bush I, and Bush II built their candidacies on white Southern votes, while Carter and Clinton used their Southern origins to stem the Republican tide.

The South is also the birthplace of most of the reactionary policies hurting working class people throughout the nation. Increasing imprisonment rates, death penalty executions, regressive

taxation, union-busting, the reduction or elimination of welfare, the limited access to health care, an aggressive foreign policy, and more all have their origins and/or a strong foothold in the South.

The South's Potential

American political institutions and policies have a Southern tilt to them. That makes the states from Texas in the west to North Carolina in the east and from Tennessee in the north to Florida in the south absolutely central to political strategies. The abolitionists knew this, the freedmen and women during Reconstruction knew this, the Wobblies knew this, and civil rights workers knew this. Yet today's left has written off the South and concentrates on New York City, Chicago, and San Francisco. These are important cities, to be sure, but none of them dominate the political landscape the way the South does.

If we don't figure out how to build power in the South, we won't be changing much of anything in this country. For while the foundations of state repression lie in the South, so do the foundations for freedom struggles: the overthrow of slavery (which, as W.E.B. Du Bois shrewdly argues, was won by a "general strike" of labor by half a million slaves who crossed Union lines), Reconstruction, Civil Rights, and the Black power movements all originated in the South.

The potential base for a new freedom movement lies in the South, too. The South is home to 16 million African Americans and 12 million Latinos, 18% and 14% of the population in the South, respectively. These groups are routinely disfranchised by electoral politics. In 2003, 35.9 million people lived in poverty in the US, and more of those poor people (about 14.5 million) lived in the South. The face of poverty in the South is racial and gendered. Women, particularly women of color, are disproportionately poor. If poor women of color end poverty in the South, then it will be ended in the whole country. Yet despite the centrality of the South and its potential for radical struggles, how many national organizations have a presence in Southern states? It can no longer be acceptable to have offices in DC, New York, and/or San Francisco and be considered national.

We Start in Atlanta

In the 2004 elections Georgia was considered rock solid Bush country. Kerry visited the state a total time of zero. Senator Zell Miller self-identifies as a Democrat but campaigned for Bush. Bush won Georgia by 500,000 votes. But according to the Georgia Department of Corrections, there are 600,000 people on the prison visitation rolls in Georgia. The math is obvious.

Ruckus's Southern strategy should begin where there's a problem, where there's potential to successfully fight this problem, and where we already have a base to fight this problem. That means we start building in Atlanta. One of Ruckus's founding members, Dan, is based in Atlanta. He is committed to building a local in Atlanta but hasn't been able to do it by himself yet. Dan is the organizer of Communities United and its Grassroots Prison Campaign. As a former staff member in Project South, he has connections with numerous organizations in the South whose work focuses on issues that relate to the six criteria. By building a local in Atlanta, we make contacts with radical movements throughout the South. This would pave the way for the creation of more Ruckus locals throughout the South.

Atlanta is the regional capital, so it makes sense to build a presence there first. Atlanta is the home to regional offices for many Southern and national organizations, and it's also a stop on

regional travel. This point is most important for Ruckus. People who work and live in the South usually have some contact with Atlanta, especially those involved in progressive work. A strong Ruckus local in Atlanta has a good chance of expanding contacts throughout the South. This makes the growth of locals in the region much easier.

The work in Georgia is also in need of people. Communities United is building an organizing collective to carry out its strategy. This collective allows interested volunteers an immediate opportunity to get involved in an exciting campaign. In addition to building an organization of family members of prisoners, the work includes a community campaign strategizing process. These two projects mean Ruckus members will have direct organizing experience (in addition to an opportunity to make strong contacts), which can be used in future work.

The Next Great Southern Freedom Movement

Du Bois wrote in 1935, “The chief and only obstacle to the coming of that kingdom of economic equality which is the only logical end of work is the determination of the white world to keep the black world poor and themselves rich. A clear vision of a world without inordinate individual wealth, of capital without profit and of income based on work alone, is the path out, not only for America but for all men. Across this path stands the South with flaming sword.”

These words hold true today, but we should (as Du Bois himself did) see the South not as the source of all these ills but as an opportunity to challenge them.

Most liberals blame the South for the nation’s problems. This is true to a point, particularly regarding the white South. But there is another South that has historically held, and still holds, the potential to transform the entire nation. Ruckus needs to see this opportunity and seize it.

The South is central to revolution in the United States.

Let’s build the next great Southern freedom movement that will rock the South, the nation, and the world. Let’s agitate and organize the South.

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Bring the Ruckus adopted the following proposal at its 2005 national meeting. In 2007, the organization voted to continue the work and give it political and financial priority within the organization for another two years.

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