

Hillary Stephenson at an immigrant rights march.



WHITES AGAINST WHITE SUPREMACY

A new generation of activists takes on the challenge of organizing white people for racial justice.

By Vy Nguyen

WHEN LILIA GARCIA BROUGHT her Latina mom and her white partner along with her to a July 2007 event introducing a relatively new group of white anti-racist activists, she was looking to introduce her loved ones to a space where they could explore ideas together about race and its social construction.

“I’m very inspired by the potential of what this represents,” said Garcia, an activist in Los Angeles. “What excites me is that as the dominant, privileged group within this social construction, whites were saying ‘this [system] doesn’t work for me.’”

AWARE-LA (Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere), which put on the event, is part of a small but growing number of groups across the country that are trying to bring organizing and alliance-building strategies into a field that

since the 1990s has been largely focused on consciousness-raising, solidarity work with people of color and the academia-created phenomenon of white studies.

The new and growing wave of grassroots white anti-racist organizations across the country and their increasing focus on organizing in white communities poses opportunities as well as provocative questions about the role of anti-racist whites in racial and social justice work.

The modern white anti-racist movement can be traced from the early days of the civil rights movement and groups like the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which was made up of both Blacks and whites and upheld integration as a goal. But activists came to question that aim in a white supremacist society, as well as examining the

limits of non-violent resistance. With the emergence of the Black Power movement in the mid-1960s, SNCC became an all-Black organization, and people of color challenged white activists to work on racism with whites directly. Militant radical white groups emerged—such as the Weather Underground and the Young Patriots—and allied with groups like the Black Panthers and the Young Lords.

According to Jeff Hitchcock, executive director of the Study of White American Culture and an organizer with the White Anti-Racist Community Action Network in Roselle, New Jersey, SNCC's call for white activists to begin a process of leadership in white communities was a pivotal moment in anti-racist history. Hitchcock cites subsequent key publications that presented "what white people were called upon to do and why," including *For Whites*

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Only by Robert Terry in 1970, the handbook "White Awareness" by Judith Katz and, later, Peggy McIntosh's 1988 paper on white privilege, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack."

The destruction COINTELPRO wrought on people of color movements similarly devastated the white radical organizations of the time. White anti-racists in the late 1970s borrowed from feminist models and focused on consciousness-raising, which became for some a primary vehicle to continue work that had in other ways been crushed, but was viewed by another segment of the white resistance movement as a retreat from an agenda that had placed Blacks at the forefront. The '80s and '90s saw a continuance of consciousness-raising training centers for white activists, with the formation of the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, along with the development of a more mainstream school of training that moved towards human relations, multiculturalism and diversity, and away from anti-oppression and anti-racism. Anti-racist white activism in the 1980s was fragmented into anti-apartheid work, localized fights against the Klan and a punk rock anti-racist youth scene that directly took on hate groups.

White studies, which reached its height in the mid-'90s, began in the late '80s through classes, doctoral dissertations and, in a few cases, university programs (though it has not reached the level of departmentalization). The field studies the cultural and institutional aspects of white privi-

lege and the construction of white culture but has been criticized for its lack of connection to social change efforts.

"There's still a predominance of studying whiteness as whiteness," said Frances E. Kendall, a long-time white anti-racist activist and author of *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race*. "My hope if the focus on whiteness continues is that organizational change and social justice are clearly the goals, not just academic study. The jury is still out on where the field is headed."

Outside of academia, white anti-racist consciousness trainers and activists continued on two largely separate tracks until the wake-up call for many in the progressive white community came in the form of the 1999 Seattle protests of the World Trade Organization. While historic

in their disruption of the WTO talks and in the ignition of a U.S. anti-globalization movement, the protests were also overwhelmingly dominated by white activists. A subsequent *ColorLines* article by Elizabeth (Betita) Martinez titled, "Where was the color in Seattle?" named the white-dominated dynamic in the emerging anti-globalization movement. The critique spread like wildfire, forcing many white activists to realize they needed to be explicitly anti-racist. Organizations like Challenging White Supremacy and Catalyst Project in the San Francisco Bay Area became popular centers for anti-racist training programs for white activists.

There has also been an upsurge in anti-racist youth and student groups in the last five years, according to Tim Wise, anti-racist educator and author of *White Like Me*. Wise attributes the increased awareness to greater technological networking tools on the internet, the academic discourse on whiteness at universities and a multiracial popular culture that is making young white people more aware of whiteness and race, though not necessarily more anti-racist.

"Thirty years ago whiteness was taken for granted—being white meant not having to think about it," said Wise. "Today, a lot of high school, college kids who are white say, 'actually no we do think about it a lot. We are thinking about race – we are thinking about what whiteness means.' As whiteness becomes more visible you're going to see both

trends emerge – one is white anti-racism, the other sadly is the trend of narrow white nationalism.”

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Today, anti-racist trainings for white activists, solidarity work with people of color and institutions like universities all continue to play critical roles. Nationally recognized groups like People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond and European Dissent in New Orleans, Catalyst Project and Y-Step (Youth Stepping Toward Ending Racism) in the Bay Area, and Crossroads Ministry in Illinois have been key in training white students, anti-war activists and post-Hurricane Katrina activists. Within the religious community, local congregations and youth groups have also been active in trainings and anti-racist activism and solidarity work.

At the same time, community organizing has emerged as a focus for anti-racist grassroots organizations.

“We need to be organizing white folks,” said Ingrid Chapman of Catalyst. “If we’re about seeing a transformation in this society we need a large base of people.”

The work of developing new models for organizing and alliance-building has also been shaped by people of color doing anti-racist and social justice work.

“There is a new group of white folks that are getting involved in anti-racist work and have taken on this work as part of their personal transformation on how to be in this world in a different way,” said Jorge Zeballos, an activist in North Carolina who does anti-racism work with whites and people of color. “Community organizing is absolutely important and necessary. One of the goals is to try to create enough of a mass of white folks that are willing to be transformed that can have an impact on the larger dynamic of race in the United States.”

Zeballos emphasized that organizing whites needs to be connected with communities of color. “This work needs to be very carefully done,” he said. “I am firmly convinced that for white folks to do this work in this way they need to have very strong relationships and alliances and accountability with folks of color.”

AWARE-LA’s model combines regular dialogue sessions to train members in anti-racist practice and white radical identity formation along with an activist/community organizing arm, though leaders emphasize that their organizing strategy is targeted toward a white middle class particular to their context in the city of Los Angeles.

“White people have a stake in ending the white supremacist system,” said co-founder Cameron Levin. “Our challenge is to work with white people to see that the white supremacist system actually doesn’t operate for the benefit of all white people, although it gives privilege to

white people in exchange for their support of the system. The white supremacist system ultimately operates for the benefit of the white ruling elite, which uses racism as a tool to divide white people from people of color.”

Members of AWARE-LA are currently in the process of developing local campaigns that partner with people of color organizations to support anti-gentrification work by engaging white gentrifiers, to help elect people of color candidates by outreaching to white voters, or support immigrant rights groups by taking on hate groups like the Minutemen.

“Because of the historic problems that have come up between well-intentioned white folks who wanted to participate but in some way or other lost people of color’s trust or perpetuated white privilege in those spaces, there’s a lot of work to be done before an organization can go full force into organizing their white communities,” said Clare Robbins, a coordinator for the group. “The consciousness-raising and solidarity work as we’ve seen it over the last two decades are really important steps towards building trust.”

At this year’s annual White Anti-Racist Summit in Colorado, white anti-racist groups across the country began to discuss an organizing and base-building model. Grassroots groups in the white anti-racist community again came together at the June U.S. Social Forum in Atlanta and agreed to begin to incorporate more community organizing in their work.

At the same time that many feel organizing in the white community is important, the strategy is also raising questions.

“It’s very important to figure out if and how we make organizing a central part of the work,” said Tim Wise. “A lot of the people who have been trained to do community organizing have been trained to do it in working-class communities of color where people are organizing for their own liberation. How do you do it in non-oppressed, non-marginalized communities, and also in working-class white communities? We need to sit down and see what that looks like.”

“We also have to be honest that white folks are deathly afraid to talk to other white folks about racism,” Wise added. “When there was the split in SNCC, most white folks were terrified to take people of color up on their charge to go work in white communities. White radicals weren’t prepared to talk to their neighbor, their family member, or who they see at the church. We need some real conversations about how to deal with that challenge.” ■

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