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Racism At The North American Anarchist Black Cross Conference

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin and JoNina Abron-Ervin

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Dear Comrades:

An ugly, racist incident happened at the September 11–14, 2014, conference of the North American Anarchist Black Cross (NA-ABC) which disrupted the meeting and created conflict among activists there, after a young activist read a letter from a white racist prison guard who opposed the parole of black political prisoner, Jalil Muntaqim. The letter was read at the instruction of Brother Jalil to show the racist and entrenched opposition to his parole by white cops and their fraternal and police associations. We do not blame Brother Jalil, who has been in prison for decades and had no way of knowing that black people would be sitting in the room when the letter was read, nor the young activist who read the letter, not knowing how it would impact the black people who heard it, and who later apologized for his error. We blame other activists on the panel and other listeners who sat by or said nothing. We also criticize the NA-ABC, which created a climate

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where this or another racist outrage was bound to occur because the organization has never dealt with its own internal racism.

We especially blame the National Jericho Movement, which put on the workshop where the letter was read and the Jericho representative at the conference, Paulette D'Auteuil. She not only refused to apologize or correct the young activist, but made racially inflammatory comments of her own, saying that blacks and other POC should "just leave the room," rather than not reading such a letter in the first place, or even giving any warning of its contents. She thus encouraged other racist letters to be read to a room full of whites in the future, thereby advocating white radical racial segregation at NA-ABC annual meetings, which already have few black or POC participants. This is an absolute and utter outrage, and everyone should find this unacceptable. Then, Paulette took the posture that it was "all Jalil's fault," and that we should take the matter up with him if we didn't like it. As we have pointed out already, we hold Brother Jalil blameless, and we do not believe he would intentionally attempt to embarrass or demean other black people by forcing them to listen to such a racist and inflammatory letter. The other Jericho representative at the conference, Kazi Toure, who is black, was not present in the room when the letter was read. But after learning what happened, he expressed embarrassment, chagrin, if not outright anger over the incident because he is black.

We therefore believe that Paulette should make a full public apology to the NAABC and to us as participants in the conference for her misbehavior, or she should not be allowed to attend further meetings of the NA-ABC. In addition, the entire panel where the racist letter was read should make a full public apology for not stopping the letter from being read, or failing in any way to rebuke the activist who read the letter. The panelists' silence just enabled the activist to repeat all this racist guard's drivel, in what the activist felt was a supportive environment of white people who "saw no problem" with the comments being repeated at a radical gathering, which included black people. Finally, the leadership of Jericho

plan applied to an overall campaign against mass imprisonment in this period. The NA-ABC must have its own politics on this, not just adopt Jericho's program. This will allow the NA-ABC to help build a new mass movement, work with black/communities of color, and build coalitions with activists of color, both inside and outside the prisons. [We had sent our mass imprisonment proposal prior to the conference, which was adopted by the Mass Imprisonment workshop].

12. Although we do not believe than any organization can deal with internal racism in isolation, we encourage the NA-ABC to try to deal with your problems internally if you can do so, but caution you not to cover up or defend yourself from charges of internal racism, but to implement or come up with viable plans to heal the group, rebuild unity, and show respect to all who attend your events in the future. We believe that this is the moment of truth for the North American-Anarchist Black Cross.

So this is our proposal dealing with anti-racist institutional change for the NA-ABC. We are open to discussing this matter further by a series of online conferences with the Denver ABC and others. This letter/proposal is not meant to be totally hostile or accusatory, and is made in good faith.

Love and struggle,

JoNina and Lorenzo Ervin, (on behalf of the Black Autonomy Prison Federation and the Ida B. Wells Coalition Against Racism and Police Brutality).

6. Join with us as we create a “Progressive Plantation” discussion page for activists on Facebook, inside and outside of the ABC.
7. We call upon you to create a permanent POC standing committee within NA-ABC to propose anti-racist internal politics for the entire group, challenge acts of racism, and involve more POC inside the ABC. Even though we will not attend any more NA-ABC meetings, we expect you to continue to work with us through this POC committee and other contacts.
8. There needs to be a process created and made part of the standing rules to expel persons or groups engaging in racist or oppressive behavior. This should come after giving them a warning.
9. When racist behavior takes place, the entire conference should shut down its workshops, and deal with it immediately, and the ABC should never cover up or ignore such incidents.
10. The ABC must make anti-fascist ideology and internal anti-racist training a central part of its politics.
11. We are not asking the North American ABC to completely divest itself of political prisoner support work for black/POC political prisoners and POW’s from the 1960’s or 1970’s, or those contemporary campaigns they have started in the animal liberation, radical environmental, and other such white radical campaigns. The NA-ABC, however, must change its white privilege model of selective support of black political prisoners to one of dealing with mass imprisonment of African/POC’s, and the new generation of prisoners since the 1980’s. Jericho is fully capable of dealing with its New African prisoners, and even those prisoners want the 20/50

should make an apology for this entire matter: for allowing the racist letter to be read, failure to exercise control of the panelists, and the racist misbehavior of Paulette as Jericho representative to the event.

And yet, all of this is just a reflection of internal racism within the North American Anarchist Black Cross, and its organizational culture that is too white, too middle class, and closed off from urban communities of color. It has never been healthy to have privileged white people doling out support to black prisoners, while not building a support base in the black community from which those prisoners come, and not recruiting black and other activists of color. The fact that NAABC holds meetings on the side of a mountain removed from the city, instead of in an urban space in Denver, speaks volumes about your lack of black participation and community outreach. You are not making a welcoming environment for blacks to attend. So this incident is to be expected in this type of white environment, and it also explains how the majority of white people who heard the racist comments thought it was “no big deal,” that the speaker “meant no harm,” that black people who heard the racially offensive comment should not be disturbed, or were being “too thin-skinned,” or that this was all just “racial agitation from Lorenzo and people he brought.” The fact is that this racist climate was already there inside the NA-ABC as a movement for a long time, and this was just the trigger for the latest incident. The ABC in North America is a Political Plantation, a white-led movement with serious internal racism, which it refuses to deal with, or even listen to peoples of color when we point it out. Some of you even blame us for raising it in the first place, and then refuse to make any changes. As one white person who did speak out from the audience said: listening to the letter from the prison guard was like listening to a “bragging letter” from a rapist. If you do not want women to apologize for their own rapes by demented men, why do you want black people to accept racist insults and then be faulted for speaking out?

Do not expect us to passively accept such racist indignities, even from our own white allies. On a personal level, the reading of the letter was the worst form of racist insult to Lorenzo. He was raised in the segregated South in the 1950's; had white racist vigilantes and cops put a gun to his head, then spit in his face and call him a nigger; tell him he had no right to speak up; that "niggers don't deserve civil rights," and that only the rights of white people mattered. In those days, Lorenzo was restrained from speaking out because of the violent racism of the KKK and other white racists. Later, Lorenzo spoke out as a young civil rights protester. He also heard plenty of vile insults from racist prison guards during his 15 years as a political prisoner, including insults from guards who opposed his release on parole. What would make you think that Lorenzo wanted to hear these insults at an ABC meeting? He will never passively accept white supremacy or its insults, even if it comes from the mouths of white radical socialists or anarchists, who feel that they are "sincerely motivated" and thus blameless in their own eyes.

We do not personally hold the Denver Anarchist Black Cross, which hosted the North America ABC conference, responsible for this incident, or think the Denver ABC had any intention for this incident to occur. However, we feel that the annual NA-ABC meeting is no longer a safe space for us as black activists, and we will not attend any future events. Nevertheless, because we care enough about ABC as a radical prison movement, and feel that positive changes should come out of this incident, we are proposing these solutions:

12 Point Racist Recovery Program for North American ABC:

1. The NA-ABC must create a permanent anti-racist/anti-oppression committee, which will be a semi-autonomous group able to challenge internal racism and call people out for offensive behavior. However, it must also train all ABC activists in anti-racist ideology, set new policies, and call

for institutional change. This committee should also be in control of all anti-racist communications of the group.

2. Every year at the annual NA-ABC gatherings, there must be workshops to talk extensively about the dangers of internal racism within the ABC. Besides anti-racist workshops for white participants, black/POC conference attendees should have their own workshops to deal with the effects of white racism, and differences among ourselves. [For instance, at least two Hispanics made two anti-black comments at the conference. One said that he was not offended by the racist letter because he saw himself as a "white Mexican," and another called Lorenzo a "token who should not be allowed to speak for all peoples of color"].
3. We are asking the Denver ABC and NA-ABC to join with the Ida B. Wells Coalition Against Racism and Police Brutality to create an online discussion list, "ABC-Anti-Racist" to discuss internal racism all during the period between ABC conferences.
4. We call upon the NA-ABC to provide a written disclaimer at the beginning of each workshop forbidding panel members to use racist or oppressive language against any racial group, nationality, or oppressed peoples. [NOTE: this rule cannot ever be used to stifle discussions of internal racism and white supremacy.]
5. We call upon the NA-ABC to use the book, "The Progressive Plantation: Racism Inside Radical Social Change Groups," as a study guide for ABC chapters and activists. We ask P & L Press to print the book at no cost, and provide it to everyone, then hold consciousness raising study groups. We will provide the manuscript for you.