



You Only Get What You're Organized to Take!

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An Interview with Willie Baptist

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John Wessel-McCoy: In your experience of the poor organizing the poor, where do we begin?

Willie Baptist: Like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out, “The prescription for the cure rests with the accurate diagnosis of the disease.”

Any approach to social change, organizing and leadership development has to be based on an accurate assessment of the situation, on an accurate analysis of the problem you aim to solve. If you have one assessment or a certain diagnosis of the disease to be cured, you're going to have a particular prescription and a particular approach to the solution. Either we're dealing with a teddy bear or we're dealing with a grizzly bear, and either estimate will determine a different set of tactics and correspondently a different organizing approach. If you think you're dealing with a teddy bear and in reality it's a grizzly bear coming at you, you're going to be in trouble. So an exact estimate of the situation has to be where you begin. This involves a tremendous amount of intellectual work to effectively and efficiently guide the practical work of particularly the poor organizing the poor.

In this respect I've learned some important lessons from my participation during the late 1980s and early 1990s in the national organizing drive of the National Union of the Homeless. For instance, one of the local organizing campaigns we conducted as part of that national drive took place in the Detroit Metropolitan area. In that campaign we helped establish a local branch of the Homeless Union. Like most other major cities the growth of homelessness in Detroit at that time became very pronounced devastating a growing number of families. Many of the homeless we organized were former autoworkers that once had stable middle-income jobs. As you know auto production is the major industry in the area employing a large proportion of the workforce enjoying the so-called "middle class" status. However, the computerization and automation of auto production like in other industries resulted in huge job losses multiplying the homeless population. Former members of the United Automobile Workers union became members of the Homeless Union. What we are witnessing throughout the entire global economy is a gigantic and unprecedented technological revolution that is eliminating sources of income, places of work, and also dislocating whole communities. Today's societies are undergoing tremendous changes. So if you organize in ways that served the past under circumstances that are now undergoing tremendous change, then your tactics and organizing approach are not going to fit the new situation. It's like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

I don't think you would have had the formulation of certain social theories such as Marxism or industrial unionism if they were not shaped by the tremendous technological changes that were taking place back during the latter 18th century, the 19th and early 20th century. Before the Industrial Revolution, you had feudal agricultural societies that dictated an approach towards organizing different from when the industrial revolutions took place. Changes in our times are analogous to those changes, but I think it's on a scale more comprehensive and has a rapidity much greater than ever before. Deindustrialization alongside of the growth of urban populations globally is historically unprecedented. I think we're dealing with a situation more like a hungry grizzly bear than a contented teddy bear, because there are massive devastations and dislocations happening in communities today, and I think the current crisis punctuates this problem. Our organizing has to take this new reality into account.

JW: In the effort to unite and organize the poor and dispossessed, what are the things we should avoid?

WB: Firstly, we must be seriously aware of one of the main strategic lessons of history, particularly of US history. That lesson is the formidable message from the ruling class (or the 'Powers That Be') warning, "Don't unite the bottom! That is don't organize those at the bottom of the economic

latter of society, that is poor and property-less masses.” In other words, uniting and organizing the poor and dispossessed posed an existential political threat to the ruling class of the propertied, rich and powerful. Their class economic interests, and all of their political and military strategies, all of their domestic and global policies are predicated on the maintenance, management and manipulation of the disunity and animosity among the bottom classes and strata. And therefore the Powers That Be will resort to any and all means necessary to defeat and destroy any attempt that pose this threat. This is the lesson of the demise of the National Negro Labor Council and the Black Panther Party, the isolation of Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois, and the execution of the abolitionist John Brown and Dr. MLK.

In this connection, you can see why the ruling class has continued to fund and reinforce the old “progressive”, anarcho-syndicalist and populist ideas promoted by large parts of the “Left” as specifically expressed in the 1930s trade union organizing and in the 1960s Saul Alinskyist community organizing. The latter of which was heavily shaped by the continued influences of the past US Civil Rights Movement and world’s National Liberation Movements of what have been called the “Third World.” There’s a saying that ‘most generals are defeated because they are always fighting the last war.’ That is what we’re finding in the “Left” today. We’re dealing with a totally new situation. In this new day you must do new things in a new way.

In 2008, the food riots that took place in more than 30 countries globally had the immediacy that the so-called Watts riots had domestically in the 1960s. Our approach today has to reflect and immediately incorporate these new global elements, elements that exerted influence indirectly in 1930s and 1960s. On the “Left,” there’s a tendency to regard the different issues as separate categories, different fronts of struggle as none related battles – to put them in different silos – and approach them from the perspective of solely organizing this ethnic community or unionizing only this or that trade of workers, mobilizing women as a separate group, or organizing only in this locality or that locality. Although organizing in the different fronts of struggle is very important, the perspective in approaching them has to change given the changed situation. The problems today are problems that revolve around and are connected to the growing concentration of wealth on a global level on the one hand, and the spreading of poverty on a global level on the other. Our organizing strategy and tactics have to be based on a comprehensive and ongoing assessment of this fundamental polarization that defines our times. No issue or injustice can be resolved unless it is connected to a domestic and global mass movement strategically directed ultimately against an exploitative and oppressive system that has domestic and global dimensions and resources. This understanding is pivotal because to limit your perspective obscuring the fundamental problem and its solution is to ultimately reduce your effort to merely leveraging pity, not power. At most, this

results in sort of a “militant do-gooderism” or charity paraded as “social justice” or empty “progressivism.” You might be granted a lot of corporate funding for efforts that break off only the leaves and branches of the problem leaving its roots untouched, only to have the leaves and branches grow back in more dangerous and fascistic forms.



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JW: Willie, I often hear you quote from Michigan Welfare Rights Organization's slogan, "You only get what you're organized to take." Speak a little bit more about that slogan.

WB: As Dr. King once pointed out in his speech honoring W.E.B. Du Bois,

"History has taught... it is not enough for people to be angry. The supreme task is to organize and unite people so that their anger becomes a transforming."

Part of an accurate estimate of the social problems we face involves power relationships. In the National Union of the Homeless we coined the slogan, "Power grows from organization . . . Freedom is never given. It must be taken. And therefore you only get what you are organized to take!" All of history – US and world history – confirms this statement. Are you able to generate a critical mass of power to counter the existing power relationships to make change? We've got to be real about that. Otherwise we're playing games. As Malcolm X once stated, "power only respects power . . . power never takes a step back except in the face of more power."

The Powers That Be, meaning big capital today, owns and therefore controls the economy, that is, the basic livelihood of society domestically and globally. It also holds state power, that is, the apparatuses of organized force and violence, and is therefore the ruling class. At these initial stages of the development of our fledgling social struggles we the poor and dispossessed cannot *out-money, out-might, nor out-media* this ruling class. However we can outmaneuver them if we deeply understand the steps that have to be taken, the stages we have to go through to build up the only source of power we have, that is, the unity and organization of our overwhelming numbers led by this knowledge. These numbers start off small before building up to the critical mass necessary for the political and economic emancipation of all of the dispossessed. To obtain political power requires a political strategy that enables us to outfight by outsmarting our class enemy. Political strategy is essentially about the concentration and focus of all efforts and resources on the completing each stage of the development of a social movement. History teaches that the first stage has to be the identification, development, and uniting of the leaders emerging from the struggles of the class of the property-less and powerless.

JW: Talk more about what you mean when you say "building up power." The word "power" gets used a lot, but people mean different things.

WB: A lot of the "Left" tends to indeed avoid this question of power, but you can't get away from it. One of the problems we've had in American history is that, although there have been a lot of social movements over time, they have been basically two types of social movements. One,

dealing with power changes: shifting power relationships, a social-economic group or section of a class out of power taking power. Here I'm not talking about the regular electoral changes in government administrative and legislative offices. And the other type of movement generates a tremendous amount of activity but ultimately results in reinforcing the position of major social elements in existing power relationships by social reform. They allowed for a modification or an adjustment of existing power relations, not a change in those power relations.

For example, the Anti-Slavery Movement, including the Civil War, resulted in power changes in terms of the slavocracy, slave capital, being taken out of power and the Northern industrial classes through social reconstruction being put into power. Or the American Revolution: the Tory elements within the colonies connected to the British Crown were in power. And what happened as a consequence of that struggle was that you had a change of places in terms of power relationships. But most of the other major struggles – the Women's Suffrage Movement, the industrial movements of the 30s, the Civil Rights Movement – these movements were reform movements, but they didn't result in power changes. We have to look at history and see what we can learn from movements for power as well as what we can learn from reform movements. The problem is that there has been very little study of US history with regard to understanding the difference between these two types of social movements and social changes.

Today, again, we are confronted with the question: Are we dealing with a teddy bear or are we dealing with a grizzly bear? Are we dealing with a fundamentally reform movement or are we dealing with a transformation movement? My experience and the experiences of others I've been involved with over the last forty years – in my study of American history and world history – suggest we're dealing fundamentally with a problem of power. That raises a question of how you generate a critical mass that's strong enough to take power.

Again, the only thing that the impoverished and oppressed classes have at their disposal is their numbers. They only enter in the scale of power struggle if those numbers are organized and are led by knowledge or an understanding of what they're up against. The influences of industrial union organizing and of community organizing – Saul Alinsky and some of the Civil Rights organizing – have left us very ignorant on the problems of power. Power grows from organizing, but how you organize – your approach to organizing under different circumstances – is something that's very critical.

JW: You talk about increasing polarization. It'd be hard for anyone to deny such a polarization is happening now. In a time such as ours, with all the different social forces at

play, can you talk about leadership? Who – and not just talking about individual leaders – might provide leadership towards a better world?

WB: In history, different periods were defined by major social polarities. And the class forces or elements of class forces that were most dislocated or most affected by that problem had to be organized and placed at the forefront in order for that problem to be brought to a just solution. The struggle against the British Crown in this country had to be led by the colonists, because they were the ones who were immediately affected. There was opposition to the British Crown coming from Spain, from France, even from within the United Kingdom. And these forces played a role in the struggle against the British Crown. But it was the directly oppressed colonists in that particular period that had to be at the forefront – that had to exhibit initiative – to actually galvanize and bring those other forces into play. The French support of that struggle was very important, but it was all predicated on the fight – and the military and political organization of the fight – by the American colonists themselves.

The overall struggle against slavery in this country had to be led by the struggle of those forces oppressed by the slavocracy, that is, the slaves of course, but also the industrial classes of the North. These most adversely affected social forces had to find some organizational expressions and thereby place their needs and demands at the forefront in order for that struggle to be brought to a successful conclusion. Take the struggle for women's suffrage. Can you imagine a struggle for women's suffrage led by men? Those forces most affected by the problem have to be at the forefront. Only they are the ones who know when their pain is relieved.

In organizing today around the issues of poverty and the issues of extreme wealth concentrated in a few hands, to resolve this problem, social hegemonic leadership of broad social movement must come from that segment of the population that is the most directly affected, that is, the poor and dispossessed masses. Our organizing and developing leaders today must first focus on uniting this segment. This must be the only basis of developing and uniting revolutionary leaders.

JW: Organizing on this scale comes down to uniting people who have, for most of this country's history, not been able to unite for a number of reasons. If this is the central question, it's a hell of a task. If it were easy, we would have done it already, right?

WB: Part of the problem of power in this country – a central aspect of the problem – is the relationship between color and class. The history of slavery, the slaughter of the Native Americans – these things have impacted American society all the way down to today and have embedded the color factor deeply in the thinking of the American people. You disregard this question at your own

peril. But how you pose it is very important. The class position of the poor and the dispossessed in the struggle to end poverty is very crucial, because what the poor show in their social and economic position is that ultimately the color question is inseparably tied to the class question. And then not only is it tied to the class question, but that the color question ultimately is or revolves around the question of class, that is the problem of the concentration and control of wealth and power.

The tendency has been to separate these issues because the prevailing influence around the issue of race, for example, has been the kind of petit bourgeois, “middle-class” kind of conception that is closely allied with the upper classes. This conception says: “The economy? I have no problem with the economy. Even with the current crisis, I have no problems with the fundamentals of the capitalist class structured economy.” Therefore, you can discuss the problems of race separate from the problems of whether I eat or not, have a house or not, do I have the power necessary to at least have my basic necessities secured or not. From the standpoint of the economically exploited and excluded, I can't discuss the questions of whether or not we're going to be able to resolve the problems of color or resolve the inequities of gender and all of the other ills in society disconnected from the questions of class and power.

I think this is where Martin Luther King in the last years of his life offers a bridge in terms of getting people to understand the inseparability of these things. He pointed at the inseparability of the three major evils: of unjust foreign policy in terms of the global situation and how it is tied to race relations and how race relations are inseparably tied to the problem of economic exploitation and poverty. You can't deal with one without dealing with the other. If we orient ourselves on the basis of those at the bottom, we're going to tend to see the inseparability of these questions in reality.

There's this poster that I saw on one of my trips from Philadelphia to Atlanta to see my daughter. There's this billboard put up by the furniture industry in South Carolina. And it references a very common slogan put out in our country that I think influences the “Left,” that I think influences the whole of society. It said: “Let the sons and daughters of the former slaveholders unite with the sons and daughters of the former slaves.” Now what's critical about that formulation is that they leave out the fact that most whites in the South were not slaveholders. They were mostly poor and working-class whites.

Left out of most discussions of history is this formula of power that W.E.B. Du Bois talked about that pitted the poor non-whites against the poor whites. Even today, when we are discussing the need of people of color to unite, it's usually done in a way to leave out the strategic necessity of

finding ways of uniting with poor whites to ensure real emancipation from poverty and all forms of human misery. As Du Bois suggested and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. directly pointed out in his 1967-68 Poor People's Campaign, this can and must be the starting point in building the necessary critical mass to move power relations in this country of 300 million. And historically that has been a stumbling block in terms of any kind of struggle for power in this country.

When you consider the power relationships as expressed in the composition of the civil bureaucracy and government jobs on all levels – municipal, state, and federal – or you consider the military and police forces, you're talking about mostly white folks. This is also true of the key corporate jobs in the "commanding heights" of the economy, i.e., the auto industry, housing, steel, energy, etc. A growing number of these strategically positioned employees, their relatives and communities are beginning to have difficult times. Poverty is increasing among whites at a faster rate than among non-whites, especially resulting from the current crisis with the dismantling of the so-called "middle class." That is why we are currently witnessing definite efforts of the ruling class to consolidate and shore up everywhere possible at least a sector of the middle strata as the social base of its power structure. These efforts include the carrying out in the United States and globally policies of accelerated "gentrification" in the major cities.

JW: You've just brought W.E.B. Du Bois up again, and in relationship to Dr. King and his concept of the triplet evils. We often talk about how Du Bois, especially in his *Black Reconstruction*, presented the fundamental question – the disunity of the poor and dispossessed – and Dr. King, in his motion towards the Poor People's Campaign, suggested the fundamental answer. Can you talk more about how a united force of the poor might move the whole nation?

WB: Given these current conditions, the analysis and conclusions Dr. King put forth in his 1967 *The Trumpet of Conscience* are especially prescient,

"The dispossessed of this nation — the poor, both white and Negro — live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be *a new and unsettling force* in our complacent national life..."

Dr. King is talking about moving the masses of the people in the U.S. He is talking about winning a large section of the middle-income strata, the social base of political power and stability in this capitalist society. This is a real pivotal problem of power. Aristotle once stated, and this has been more than corroborated by world history, that “Where the middle class is large, there are least likely to be factions and dissension.” Powers That Be understand this question and see the real political threat posed by the dismantling of the so called “middle class by the continuing economic crisis combined with the potential of the poor uniting as a powerful organized social force capable of unsettling the political complacency and compliance of the increasingly economically shaken middle strata. Today we are confronted with great opportunities and great dangers with regard to problems of political influence and power relations than have rarely happened in American history. Yet we leave these opportunities for the fascists to win sections of the poor and working class whites.

W.E.B. Du Bois pointed out this problem of power in his *Black Reconstruction*, where he talks about how the political situation of slavery in the South was different from slavery in the Caribbean and South America. There, the opposition among the slaves tended to have a much wider and more of a mass character. That even culminated in the Haitian Revolution, which is the only actual slave-led uprising to successfully take the slavocracy out of power. You had this massive uprising in the Caribbean and South American slavery, but in America – in the Southern United States – you had smaller resistance in the forms of runaway slaves and preempted slave rebellions. Du Bois pointed out very clearly that at its height in the Southern United States, you had something like four million black slaves, but at the same time, right alongside the black slaves, you had something like five million poor whites. You didn't have that kind of demographics in Haiti where enslaved blacks outnumbered whites by 12 to one.

The poor whites in southern United States were plentiful. While there were at height of American slavery 4 million black slaves, there were 5 millions poor southern whites. They were the social base for what served as the police forces then, this included the slave drivers and slave patrols. The ruling slaveholders were able to use these two sections of the bottom against each other. And with the accumulation of wealth from the brutal exploitation of black slaves, the powers that be controlled the poor whites, and they employed poor whites to control the poor blacks. This formula of plantation power politics is what we have been dealing with in the US all the way up to this day. For instance, we can see how this racial political formula is being effectively employed to control and oppress immigrant workers. For us to not completely appreciate power relationships of class rule is to our detriment and to the peril of the struggle.

You see this lack of appreciation in most discussions of the accelerated gentrification and the growth of global cities today. The tendency is to limit the discussions as to the whole complexity of these processes by only seeing what is perceived as simply white folks coming in and displacing poor peoples of color. You don't see the whole class question. You don't see that the people coming in are not poor whites, because poor whites can't afford to come in. Or you don't see communities like poor multiracial Kensington in Philadelphia, PA that are proliferating throughout the country, where you have an equality of poverty developing. I've gone to places within Kensington and the neighborhoods around it where we'd go into these homes, and you'd see homeless families – poor whites – who are stacked up in the housing; where you'd have the holes in the roof, holes in the ceilings, holes in the floor, living under horrible conditions. Certainly the blacks in the community of Mount Airy, for example, where the petit professionals live, have better homes and far better living standards than these poor whites in Kensington and neighboring Fishtown. And the key political question is: Do poor blacks in Kensington have more in common with poor whites in Kensington, or do they have more in common with former Merrill Lynch CEO, multi-millionaire Stanley O'Neil or with Colin Powell or Condoleezza Rice or other upper class blacks folks? No, they have absolutely nothing in common with these black folks and everything in common with poor whites.

In fact, I think that speaks to a dangerous kind of racist exceptionalism that says you can have class differentiation among whites but it doesn't exist as a factor among people of color. And no, the upper class blacks are not puppets or modern "Uncle Toms." Despite their adroit use of racial colloquialisms, they are quite class conscious of their integration into the ruling capitalist class and bent on intelligently and steadfastly defending their class interests like any other of their capitalist brothers and sisters. Of course, the questions of class factors in majorly in terms of how the political dynamics are played out – in terms of the prevailing and historically evolved formula of power in this country, that is, the cruel and shrewd manipulations of the color divisions within the bottom class. And I think this persistent aspect of power relationships in the US has to be taken into account if we're going to have the tactics and the organizing approach that really brings about social change. Otherwise, it ultimately comes to pity for poor folks – especially poor nonwhite folks who are down and out and that people should feel guilty about. Well, people don't feel guilty about that especially when they are beginning to hurt from increasing class exploitation and dislocations. Historically and politically, we have to have them understand how their oppression is tied to your oppression, how their exploitation is tied to your exploitation.

Your arm is cut off and my finger is cut off. A cut-off finger is certainly less than a cut-off arm, but it still hurts. If we don't link your hurt with my hurt but keep comparing whose injury is worse, we're

not going to be able to unite the critical mass necessary to move the existing power relationships. Somehow we've got to solve this formula of power described by Du Bois if we're going to succeed.

The development of leaders with a proper grasp of social theory and political strategy allows for a deeper grasp of the big picture so we don't become a pawn to a greater power game. You can see the Left – the so-called “Left” – falling into that trap where the tendency, because of the influence of the recent Civil Rights Movement and the National Liberation Movements is for the Left to gravitate and hover around the inner cities and people of color exclusively. Whereas the Right – the so-called “Right” – gravitates and hovers around poor whites. Therefore the bigger picture is that both the “Left” and the “Right” are manipulated by the powers that be. And they're continuing to play out a game W.E.B. Du Bois described as beginning with the origins of this country.

JW: You reference Dr. King a lot, especially drawing from his last years, when he launched the Poor People's Campaign. That campaign in his view was about uniting and organizing the poor and dispossessed across color lines and other lines of division. What are the main lessons do you draw from his last years?

WB: One thing that's very crucial in this period is the role of education and consciousness-raising. What I've learned in my experiences in organizing is that building socio-political movement is about more than simply mobilizing bodies. It's essentially about moving minds and hearts. And education is central, especially in an information age. The technological revolution I alluded to earlier has created this ability to impact people's worldviews that ultimately influences people's political wills, which is what we're trying to get at. Today, unlike any other period, these influences work like a 24/7 *Netwar* against the poor as the first line of attack against all of us.

The negative narratives of the 24/7 *Netwar* against the poor have deeply embedded stereotypes and misconceived notions of the poor, This war bombarded the public mental terrain with lies that essentially said the poor are poor because of their own indiscretion and laziness and not because of the inhumane poverty-producing economic system of capitalist class exploitation. Like with oppressive systems' justifying negative narratives in history this war of ideas and ongoing attacks has invested in the poor a countering ideological power when they are united and organized in sustain and articulate campaigns of dramatic protests. This would be much like the powerful ideological and political impact of the protracted rebellion of the runaway poor slaves of the Underground Railroad. Against Dr. King was prescient when he stated,

If they [the poor, white and nonwhite] can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be *a new and unsettling force* in our complacent national life...”

In looking at the way you fight today as opposed to how we fought yesterday, the question of the relationship of education to organizing is more intimate and integral. You've got to talk as you walk. You've got to teach as you fight. You've got to learn as you lead. In other words, we're talking about a political education that is held both in the classroom and in the class struggles, online and offline. These things are inseparable to the problem of organizing, and I think the Saul Alinskyist influence and some of the trade unionist influence and even standard community organizing has separated those questions let alone not making political education central to the kind of organizing needed today. These approaches tend to de-emphasize the importance of education and thus miss out on the opportunity of using the daily struggles as a school to elevate consciousness particularly in terms of leadership development.

Part of that education is recognition of lessons from history. The Powers That Be have done a great disservice with regards to the philosophy and general curriculum of education in this country. They've left out whole periods of history and obscured certain periods of history that have direct bearing on what we are trying to do today. The experience of Martin Luther King in the last period of his life is obscured. It is something that is pushed under the rug. Clearly up until a certain point in his development, he was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement that was focused on de jure racial apartheid in this country. But at a certain point towards the end of his life, he began to recognize that – even though they were able to get the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 passed – the black masses who were succumbing to economic exploitation couldn't benefit from the results of the Civil Rights Movement. This was partly expressed in the several hundreds of ghetto uprisings that broke out all over the country during last half of the 1960s due inhumane living conditions and concentrated police repression. Reflecting on these mass outbreaks of the impoverished ghettos, Dr. King pointed out: What good is it to be able to go into a restaurant now since they've taken down the "whites only" sign if you can't afford a hamburger? Today you don't have the "whites only" sign in the front window of restaurants. You have another sign. It's the menu, and the menu has the different items and their costs. And if you can't afford what's on that menu, I don't care what color you are; there's no need for you to go in there.

This is a very significant development because it offers us the opportunity to move American thinking in a way that focuses on power shifts and social change. But we've got to grapple with this reality. Martin Luther King said, "It didn't take a penny to integrate lunch counters in this country" (that is, to defeat de jure segregation). But when we talk about ending poverty, to paraphrase him, you're talking about a whole reconstruction of "economic and political power" relationships. He recognized that. And the Powers That Be saw that not only did he recognize that, but that he began to utilize his great international prestige to take actions that were a real

political threat to them and their domestic and foreign policies. That's why he was killed; that was proven by the virtual media blackout of the 1999 MLK Assassination Trial in Memphis, Tennessee.

People should look at the transcripts of the testimonies of this historic trial where they proved that MLK's proposals threatened the powers that be. The evidence showed that the much-publicized theory – that a lone fanatical white racist killed MLK – was false, that this was the big lie spread by the FBI because they knew public opinion would be prone to believe it at the time. Indeed his murder involved the complicity of elements from all levels of government and intelligence services. It says a lot in terms of lessons for us today. How do we resolve this fundamental problem of power? How do you unite the dispossessed – the bottom – in order to turn things upside down in terms of resolving the problems of homelessness, healthcare, and all of these problems that are manifestations of this basic problem: the polarity between the concentration of wealth on one hand and the spread of poverty on the other?

JW: Lastly, you mention about the need for leaders who are organizers and teachers. What are the qualities of leadership that are needed to do this work?

WB: When we talk about really developing a successful movement, there has to be an advanced theoretical and intellectual development to the movement. It has to be an engaged intellectualism. This is something that is indispensable, and this is where the education and consciousness-raising element is critical. Theory is basically the summary of historical experience. It's a means to take the general lessons of history as a way to guide your analysis, so you don't find yourself bumping your head against walls that other people before you have bumped their heads against. Yet we have in our culture and mindset an anti-theory, anti-intellectual approach especially when it comes to social struggle. Now, this anti-intellectualism is not coming from the poor and dispossessed. It's coming from the intellectuals. In fact the whole anti-theory philosophy of pragmatism came out of Harvard. It came out of people thinking through a philosophy that would divert attention and be an apology for the economic and political status quo. And it still has influence today as expressed in its most recent variants such as "poststructuralism" and "postmodernism." It has the effect of having people not see the importance of taking the lessons of history and the lessons of experience in terms of theory and using them to guide our analysis and actions. This is something that is a real disservice, because – even though there's reference to theory on the Left – a large part of the anti-intellectualism comes from the Left. It doesn't come from poor folks or people who are trying to figure out what in the hell is happening to them. They're hungry for analysis of why it is that they are poor and who benefits from it and what their strategy is and how we counter their

strategy with a strategy. These are the basic yearnings of those who are in a position of pain and suffering every day.

We need advanced theory that enables a kind of organizing that allows us to match our sophistication with the sophistication of the strategists, ideologists, and theologians of the present “powers and principalities.” You can't meet sophistication just with sentimentalism. There has to be an engaged intellectualism – an engaged scholarship – to successfully guide our thinking and fighting. If we don't outsmart the enemy, there's no way we're going to outfight them.

Again, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his 1967 book, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, pointed out,

Deeds uninformed by educated thought can take false directions. When we go into action and confront our adversaries, we must be as armed with knowledge as they. Our policies should have the strength of deep analysis beneath them to be able to challenge the clever sophistries of our opponents.”

If we're going to go forward, we've got to resolve this problem of education and theory. The important thing that I've learned in my political life was that the major defeats and mistakes were largely a result of a lack of a historical perspective that comes from theory, a lack of understanding of political economy that comes from theory, a lack of leadership development that comes from theoretical development.

And not having leaders – a core of leaders – who are connected to the struggles of the poor and dispossessed, who are committed, who are competent, and who are clear in terms of their analytical approach is problematic in terms of your ability to sustain an effort, to stick and stay the course, to go up against the sophistication of the forces we're dealing with. What I've learned most is that the first stage in any kind of organizing is how you identify and develop those leaders that emerge in those struggles, how you use those struggles to identify leaders and unite them into a guiding intellectual force that can then organize the movement. They have to have the sophistication that matches the sophistication of the powers that be.

I don't think that we understand what we're up against. The forces we're up against, on the one hand, don't give a damn about us. They subject masses of people throughout the world to the most excruciating horrors. You think they're not prepared to do that to us here in the United States? In fact, they are doing this to an increasing number of us right at this moment. Look at growing ranks of the homeless and rising death tolls due to poverty in this the richest country in the

world. Certainly the history of people of color suggests that they are prepared to do dirty to anybody for dominance and the dollar. Still broad sections of the people cannot believe that the people we're up against are people who are very fascistic and are prepared to sweep us under the rug, throw us off the cliff and have us to live out the most horrible existence. These people don't give a damn about us. You've got to understand that. That's what we're up against.

At the same time, we must respect them, which means to study to know them and keep up with their strategic thinking and moves. They are the Powers That Be, and they are presently the most organized. They have their chambers of commerce and the different trade associations and most importantly, they have very sophisticated and leading network of "think-tanks": the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), the Rand Corporation, the Carnegie Endowment, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and other such groupings. The Carnegie foundation is now organized as the first global think-tank. The CFR has recently set up the Council of Councils, which consists of similar think-tanks and policy formulating group like itself from many of the other major countries. These powerfully influential think tanks study the daily developments around the world; they study a problem before it becomes an issue. This is a tremendous opposition that we face. We've got to know our enemy and strive to know what they know. For if we only know ABC and they know A to Z then we stand to be outmaneuvered and manipulated. Our organizing strategy and tactics must be and can be developed directly in opposition to theirs.

But a lot of organizing makes general references to capitalism and the oppression of people of color at the hands of white folks or something like that, and not proceeding from an examination of what and who we are really dealing with. Leadership development and the theoretical development that undergirds that leadership development has to take those kinds of things into account if we're going to proceed effectively, if we are going to organize an independent mass socio-political movement that can move the issues that affect us today.

The history of struggles of the poor and dispossessed classes — world and domestic, past and recent — teaches many lessons, about how these struggles were successfully and unsuccessfully united and organized. It teaches that is not sufficient to organize the poor in only separate sectors and locales and around particular issues. They must be united and organized on the basis of a common program of their common interests and demands against not only the symptoms but against the cause of all their pains and sufferings. In other words the poor and dispossessed must be united and organized as the poor and dispossessed nationally and globally to abolish their common exploitation and oppression as a class by capitalism and the rich as the ruling class.

Just as the ruling class with their well-established network of think tanks and policy forming groups, have their council of generals and officer corps, the impoverished must have theirs. These generals are the educated and trained leaders who arise and develop out of the different issues or fronts and locales of struggle of particularly the different sectors of the property-less classes and impoverished strata. As I've mentioned already all social struggles, all social movements develop in stages. History teaches that to be successful all stages must be strategically completed like taking one step at a time up the staircase. Today we are in the initial stages of building a necessarily broad and powerful social movement to abolish all domestic and global poverty. It cannot be overemphasized that at such stages the focus or concentration of all energies and resources must be on the identification, education, training, and unity of the leaders newly emerging out the life and death battles of the dispossessed. These struggles are at first separated and fragmented before being united as a political army by a united group of leaders with a common strategic perspective and objective. The leaders learn as they lead, teach as they organize these embattled masses into a force that has to be reckoned with. To win the separate fronts of struggle must be united and coordinated along the lines of a clear and sophisticated strategy. Through this strategic leadership the struggles grow from solely organizing against the immediate effects or the leafs and branches of the problems of exploitation and oppression, to organizing against their root cause. This means that the organizing of a movement must begin with the organizing of the organizers, that is, with the uniting of a group the teachers and leaders of that movement. This is no easy task. As Antonio Gramsci, the Italian and international revolutionary leader, correctly noted,

“One speaks of generals without an army, but in reality it is easier to form an army than to form generals. So much is this true that an already existing army is destroyed if it loses its generals, while the existence of a united group of generals who agree among themselves and have common aims soon creates an army even where none exists.”

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John Wessel-McCoy focuses on leadership development and political education. He develops relationships with grassroots community, religious, and labor leaders nationwide. In addition, he researches and develops curriculum focused on history, particularly focused on lessons from the abolitionist movement. He has worked as a union organizer with parking attendants, childcare providers, and home healthcare workers in addition to doing community organizing with homeless and low-income residents in Chicago. He earned an MA in 2009 from Union Theological Seminary and was awarded the Charles Augustus Briggs Award, given to graduates who demonstrated "qualities of conscience, commitment, and courage as exemplified in the life and work of Charles Augustus Briggs." He grew up Roman Catholic and continues to identify with the social justice and liberative social teachings in his tradition. John is a proud father. He is originally from Decatur, Illinois.

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