

April 4, 2009

Dear President Obama,

We write to you as community organizers from the Southern United States to add our voices to the many congratulating you on your historic election. We celebrate your courage and audacity. We also claim your victory as ours, and, indeed, find ourselves so much more hopeful now that you are at the nation's helm. We see you as continuing the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who in giving voice to the conditions, aspirations and struggles of grassroots Southerners for full economic and political participation, pointed out the injustices in our body politic and inspired thousands across the nation to believe we have both the responsibility and possibility to eliminate them. We are especially moved by how you, in the tradition of Dr. King, have challenged generations young and old to transform the conditions in which we find ourselves by new frameworks and out-of-the-box approaches.

The purpose of our letter is to call your attention to the need for federal action to remedy how the South, historically and today, remains the nation's underbelly. As a former community organizer, we believe you recognize that the status of "bottom" is the key indicator of the health and well-being of a nation, and we appeal to you to keep fresh this perspective as you frame and implement policies to bring our nation to a realization of full democracy, peace, economic recovery and opportunity for all. We want to highlight the compounding effects of the various structural arrangements—institutions, policies, and practices—that have kept our region underdeveloped and have conspired to nullify the impact of progressive national policies in the region. We are looking to you as our President to partner with us, to use the powers and resources at your command to work with us to reform these institutional arrangements, and together, refuel the social change organizing that is necessary to transform the region.

We are initiating a collective process to forge a **Southern Action Plan for Change** to address the multiple fronts of poverty and the rising economic conditions in our region. Through a series of Southern People's Assemblies and other activities, we are working to galvanize intergenerational voices from communities, organizations, leaders, activists and supportive elected officials, to surface ideas, priorities and strategies to target the economic and structural changes needed to transform the realities outlined in this letter. But we cannot do it alone.

We are asking you to partner with us to create a **Southern Agenda** within your administration, and an institutional mechanism, such as a special commission with a budget, to oversee and coordinate its implementation. The most effective partnerships include the wisdom and skills of government and grassroots communities, and we believe families, women and young people represent the base that will anchor government action to make real change happen. We urge you to develop clear lines of communication between Southern communities and your administration, and encourage you to involve grassroots Southern voices and those from a broad cross section of our communities, in the framing of the agenda, goals and timetables.

We want to offset the influence of national pundits who write off our largely rural region as backward and irrelevant or who hail institutional racism as passe. We remind you that the spirit of resistance, innovative action, visionary leadership, and audacious community organizing emanating from the South have had a transformative influence on the nation as a whole, expanding opportunities and participation for marginalized communities throughout our country. Our rootedness in community, values anchored in faith, family, and caring for one another, and our creativity in harsh conditions of *making a way out of no way* are some of the strengths we can contribute to national recovery.

AS THE SOUTH GOES SO GOES THE NATION

There is the saying, demonstrated by history, “As the South goes, so goes the nation.” This is particularly true in light of the South’s changing demographics. Two-thirds of the nation’s fastest-growing counties are in the South, which reflects 40% growth since 1980, compared to 30% nationally. This portends the South will have greater political influence in electing presidents and congressional representatives. Projections are that the region may gain as many as nine Congressional seats after the 2010 census.

Our 12-state region also has nearly 60% of the nation’s African Americans and fastest growing Latino immigrant population in the last decade. This suggests we will have an increasing number of majority “minority” districts, making the region more politically competitive and critical to any strategy for national political power. Your election in North Carolina where you won 56% of white voters under 30—the highest in the nation—demonstrates there is a new generation of white voters in the South. If we can build on the 20% rise nationally in the turnout of minority voters in 2008, we have the basis for significant change in the region.

A REGION OF CONCENTRATED DISPARITIES

The South still remains the nation’s poorest region, exhibiting gross disparities of persistent poverty, racial inequity, environmental degradation, educational under-achievement, and ill health, relative to the rest of the nation. Three of the five poorest areas of the country are in the South—Central Appalachia, the Lower Mississippi Delta and the Southern Black Belt. (*Poverty in Rural America, Housing Assistance Council, June 2006*). Of the 100 poorest counties in the nation, 74 are located in the South. Poverty rates, averaging 14% in 2006, have risen in nearly every Southern state since 2000. They are significantly higher for children, female-headed households, immigrant families and communities of color, hovering from 40-64% in the poorest counties. Eight of the 15 bottom states in education expenditure per pupil are in the South and the South is the only region in the nation where low-income children constitute a majority in public schools. (*A New Majority: Low Income Students in the South’s Public Schools, Southern Education Foundation, 2007*).

Moreover, in contrast to national trends, HIV and teen pregnancy rates are on the rise in the region, as are low performing schools, high school dropouts, youth incarceration rates, poisoned environments, and chronic diseases, all of which disproportionately impact people of color. Such disparity exposes the persistence of institutional racism.

SOUTHERN STATE ECONOMIC STRATEGY

Southern “right-to-work” laws have been the lynch pin of Southern state economic strategy. This *race to the bottom* strategy has ensured a region of working poor by making unionization and collective bargaining difficult, and in the case of North Carolina public workers, illegal. State policies have favored low wages, minimal regulation, low and regressive taxes, suppression of workers rights, absentee ownership of land, capital, factories and natural resources, and racial and gender discrimination in workplaces, neighborhoods and services. Because a higher percentage of black workers are employed in the public sector, *right-to-work* has more severely restricted economic progress in the black community. Women are impacted disproportionately by the exploitative conditions in the South as well which has the highest regional percentage of women in the workforce. Because of their added exposure to sexual harassment and violence at work, women have borne the brunt of such workplace exploitation, particularly in plants, such as poultry and catfish, where employers hired a predominantly female workforce for its perceived docility. Southern state development strategies aggressively market these characteristics to lure branch plants and investment from the North and West and foreign industry. The downside has been a flurry of competition among states, which has drained public coffers through opaque and unaccountable use of public incentives and turned the region into a revolving door for transient industry.

Despite two “Reconstruction” eras (1870’s and 1950-60’s), national policy never thoroughly dismantled the bastion of states rights that protected these arrangements. Just how the doctrine of states rights is embedded in the body politic is exemplified in Mississippi being the last state to ratify the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution that legally abolished slavery. That ratification took place in 1995 as a temporary act, which was renewed in 2007 for 100 years. Three Southern states were also the last to ratify the 19th amendment giving women suffrage, which they did in 1984, 1971 and 1970.

FEDERAL NEGLECT

Federal policy towards Native Americans, black farmers and Katrina survivors are three of poignant examples of how institutional racism has impacted our region from the national level as well. Because most of the Southern Indian Bands are not recognized tribes with US Government treaties, the denial of federal subsidies has only deepened their poverty. As amply documented in the Pitford suit and settlement, U.S. Department of Agriculture policy discriminated against African American farmers in crop allotments, allocation of credit and resources, and access to markets. This discrimination has resulted in such wholesale elimination of black farmers and black-owned farmland that any aggressive remedial action will likely take generations to recover the loss. In addition, the infrastructure for implementing USDA policy and programs is controlled by local politics. This is one example of how denying political access has enabled Southern white elites to suppress black opportunity and maintain black poverty. The implementation of other national programs, such as welfare, disability benefits, and unemployment, as well as environmental protection, has had similar fates.

The example of Katrina survivors is more well-known, since the scenes of gross neglect, abuse, and disdain by FEMA and other authorities appeared on network news. For black Southerners,

the story of FEMA's relief programs giving consistent preferential treatment to affluent whites over blacks and poor people was familiar, based on previous disasters. What was new about Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, however, was that the dismantling of government had proceeded to such an extent that FEMA lacked the capability to respond adequately. Unaccountable government and unbridled corporate activity continue to allow environmental degradation of the coastal wetlands and delayed building of adequate levies. We support the efforts of representatives of diverse Gulf Coast communities and their national supporters who have asked you to sign an executive order authorizing the Gulf Coast Civic Works Program.

CAUSALITIES: ENVIRONMENT AND QUALITY OF LIFE

For generations, people in Southern and Central Appalachia have seen corporations controlled by people outside the region extract the vast wealth of our resources, while paying minimal taxes and exploiting workers with low wages and unsafe working conditions. Central Appalachia, one of the South's three areas of consistent poverty, provides a stark illustration of how the South came to be resource-rich with the poorest people. Now mountaintop removal, with its degrading effects on the environment and quality of life, is accelerating the process. Government neglect has compounded Appalachia's environmental disasters. The 1972 Buffalo Creek flood that killed 125 people and destroyed sixteen coal mining communities in West Virginia and the more recent coal ash spill at the TVA plant in east Tennessee are examples of the results of failure to adequately monitor dams. The current spike in Black lung, a deadly disease that can be largely prevented by effective dust control, is another example of what happens when government fails to act.

Federal environmental regulation has not protected military families either. According to a law suit on behalf of 850 Marine families from Camp Lejeune (NC), from 1957-87 they were exposed to water polluted with carcinogenic toxins in amounts 40 times current allowable standards.

Poignant examples of how exploitative conditions in the South disparately impact women are seen in policies of the medical and welfare establishments. Driven by theories of eugenics, they subjected black, Native American, and poor white women to forced sterilizations. Fannie Lou Hamer was one such victim of the "Mississippi Appendectomy," in which her uterus was removed instead of a benign tumor. Poverty, particularly the lack of decent and affordable health care, fundamentalist culture, and violent hate groups which have terrorized women's clinics and murdered doctors, have worked together to restrict Southern women's access to full reproductive freedom.

Forced by Lawrence v. Texas, Southern states were the last to decriminalize homosexuality. This legacy toughened the hostile fundamentalist culture that made lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Southerners vulnerable to hate crimes, discriminatory laws and practices, and social ostracism. Federal policies, however, have not offered redress nor solutions since they exclude LGBT people from civil rights protections, including laws against hate crimes.

FEEBLE INFRASTRUCTURE

There is insufficient infrastructure in the South to support the implementation of federal policy that benefits ordinary people, and that is why much progressive legislation has bypassed the region. The US Department of Labor has minimal presence here and little relationship with unorganized workers. Mississippi has no Department of Labor at all, and five Southern states have no minimum wage laws. The lack of coordination between federal agencies, particularly the Environmental Protection Agency and DOL, makes it difficult for communities to organize successfully around polluting industries—such as industrial hog farms—that are injurious to workers’ and residents’ health.

Private philanthropy has not altered the picture either. That which emanates from foundations and donors from within the region primarily supports services, steering clear of upsetting the apple cart. What comes to us from national foundations amounts to such a meager portion relative to what goes to the rest of the country that it actually contributes to the South’s deepening disparity.

NEOLIBERAL GLOBALIZATION: SOUTHERN ECONOMIC STRATEGY GONE NATIONAL AND BEYOND

In many respects globalization can best be understood as the South’s economic strategy ascending to the national level, aided by new technologies. It first appeared as Reaganomics (domestic policy) and then was systematized as market-driven “free” trade policy (international). It mirrored Southern state policy in intent—i.e. remove encumbrances to the free reign of corporations and private capital by dismantling government and eliminating the power of workers—and in design: trade and investment liberalization, privatization, deregulation, tax cuts, elimination of social programs, union busting, civil liberty violations, and deployment of troops.

The restructuring of work as contingent labor, combined with the outsourcing and off-shoring of jobs, were corporate strategies to reduce labor costs. They accelerated massive job hemorrhaging alongside the mergers and leveraged buyouts that hit the region in the 1980’s. The new fractured jobs bypassed much labor law and, by eliminating benefits, mushroomed the ranks of the uninsured, which now hover above 19% in the region. All sectors, from small farmers to medical doctors, were touched. “Zero tolerance” and ability tracking policies, that were mainly applied in underfunded public schools with majority students of color, contribute to these new arrangements by relegating most students of color to contingent service jobs.

The demise of traditional industries in the South was anticipated in the NAFTA debates, and indeed, rural communities have been severely hit. (Textiles lost 40% of plants in NC and 65% jobs). But new growth industries—such as the *information highway*, biotech, auto, and industrial hog farming—have defied promises of picking up the slack and exhibit unstable employment.

The effects of these policies on ordinary workers are higher production quotas, longer shifts, more injuries, less pay, long periods of joblessness and/or access to unstable temp or part-time

work. Unemployment and TRA benefits haven't been enough, particularly for older workers with limited formal education. Only sixty percent of laid-off workers found work after 2 years, which paid less than 90% of their pre-layoff wages. Credit discrimination and insufficient training marginalized particularly skilled workers of color, who tried to create their own businesses. The households of working families were stressed by having to cope with fewer resources, and also with reduced and erratic parenting time because of the burden of working several jobs. It was in this context that predatory lending surged.

Globalization policies have destabilized local economies on every continent as well, forcing 200 million people to migrate in search of safety and jobs. While only 2% have come to the US, the portion coming to the South has given our region the fastest growing population and nearly overnight transformed the demographics in our communities. Most newcomers in the South are Mexicans and reside in rural communities, but configurations vary from community to community. For example, in Gwinnett County, GA, 90% white a decade ago, 100 languages are now spoken in county schools. The negative side of these trends is that they have ignited competition in grassroots communities over scarce resources because the region has little infrastructure, few human resources, and little multi-cultural experience with which to accommodate immigrants, starting with language barriers.

Corporate greed and politicians have coalesced to create a combination of unjust immigration policies and weak labor laws which support employers' divide-and-conquer tactics in the resurgence of super exploitation of workers, especially the undocumented, creating a new and increasing underclass of immigrant workers. These workers, having been forced to migrate from their countries of origin due to the devastating impact of the global economy, accept low wages and dangerous working conditions in order to feed their families. Non-payment of wages is a growing trend across the region, and slavery has even resurfaced notably in Florida and New Orleans. The case of Francisca Herrera illuminates the rollback on gains won by the Civil Rights Movement and farmworkers movement. Her son was born without limbs, because she was exposed to pesticides while she was pregnant and working in NC tomato fields (2004).

Draconian policies deny undocumented immigrants access to higher education, health care and drivers' licenses. These measures are not only unjust and unfair, especially to young people who have only known this country, they have backfired as public policy. More horrific are the detentions and deportations associated with the ICE raids, 287g, and similar policies. They intensify racial profiling and bring terror and abuse to our communities, reminiscent of Jim Crow and Dred Scott.

The combined effect of the disproportionate impact of these policies on black workers amounts to a wholesale onslaught that booted many African Americans out of the formal economy. Yet, their exclusion has received little public attention, because most analyses and work focuses on the individual factors, rather than the sum. Tally these:

- Privatization cut full-time jobs with benefits, and left the higher percentage of black workers employed in the public sector vulnerable to greater discrimination and lower pay.

- Deregulation crippled protection from OSHA, EEOC, EPA, FEMA, HUD, SEC, and the Office of Civil Rights. Coupled with employer friendly NLRB and federal court decisions in civil rights cases, it restored black families' vulnerability to job, housing and credit discrimination, injuries, illness, disabilities, and disasters.
- The South leads the pack in the well-documented, intentional targeting of African Americans, regardless of income, by predatory lenders. Four of five metropolitan statistical areas with the largest lending disparities are located in North Carolina and Virginia.
- Plant closings and lay-offs have destroyed jobs that, while offering lower pay, less seniority, and harsher conditions relative to whites and Northern counterparts, provided the most stable income in the black community and supported families and small businesses.
- Unjust immigration policies, weak labor laws, and racism have combined in ways that have given employers new opportunities to practice flagrant discrimination and to make all workers more vulnerable. African Americans have experienced a decline in employment in every sector, even fast foods, and continued exclusion from jobs that have historically been denied them.
- Welfare cuts and the reduction of safety net programs, particularly the welfare to work programs, put many rural, low income women in near-indentured status and without promised childcare and transportation benefits, and correlates to the growth of strip clubs, sex workers, illicit drug trade, and skyrocketing HIV rates in rural communities.
- Mobilization of the National Guard for Iraq and Afghanistan has emptied college classrooms of huge numbers of black students, particularly from HBCUs, and graduates out of work, exposing the enormous disparity in the African American community's reliance on military funding for higher education.

The wars in the Middle East also have had a disproportionate impact on Southern communities beyond race. Forty-two percent of enlisted soldiers come from Southern states and largely from rural communities, which is why our nation's wars have been a devastating force in the region. Southerners without privilege have used the military as their primary pathway to opportunity—a job and/or a way to pay college tuition. But the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have flipped the script. War casualties have thrust many military families into poverty and grief, especially when soldiers return home to inadequate medical and mental health services.

In short, Southern engineered globalization, though a process of economic expansion, has generated greater racial disparity, wealth gap, and poverty of women and children in the region, even though these policies were not formulated with discriminatory intent. It has also turned the South into a sinkhole for the nation: sucking out jobs, depressing wages, defeating worker organization, and most recently, precipitating the financial crisis that has also foreclosed homes, stopped credit, and sparked global depression. But, in these dire circumstances lie opportunities, too, as the new demographics and political realignments in the region we previously mentioned, suggest.

REMEDY—A SOUTHERN PLAN OF ACTION FOR CHANGE

What we need most is a coordinated approach to attack the causes of poverty in the region , particularly in rural communities, an approach that helps marshal the vision, talents and energies of grassroots communities by investing in community organizing and networking. The impact of the economic recovery package on our region is limited without addressing these structural arrangements that create and maintain the issues we face. We want to help forge a new economy that sustains all families, communities, and the planet.

Establishing a **Southern Agenda** within your administration to work with us to develop and mount on-the-ground strategies and partnerships will help make such potential real by being able to focus on such structural areas as:

- a) Eliminating racial disparities and the human rights abuses of current immigration policies
- b) Establishing uniform voting rights that extend full access to all, and aligning our voting rules with international voting standards, to which our nation already has subscribed
- c) Eliminating right to work laws
- d) Changing the *intent* doctrine in civil rights to one of *effect*
- e) Developing alternative forms of energy in collaboration with mining communities to assure that the switch away from coal does not mean these communities are sacrificed
- f) Bringing living wage green collar jobs that can lift people out of poverty to rural and urban communities

Thus, we are asking for a plan, mechanism and opportunity to partner with you, to galvanize intergenerational voices, ideas and priorities from across the region. We think a process that targets young people and grassroots women would be the most strategic—the former because they have energy, inspiration, and skills; the latter because they are the anchors of our families and communities, make up the majority of community organizing and service troops, and have shown themselves to be the most creative in *making a way out of no way*.

At the time of his assassination, Dr. King had begun calling attention to the economic underpinnings of structural racism, poverty, political power, war, and other social issues and formulating a massive poor people's campaign. We believe that it was his call for a comprehensive attack on the lingering legacy of slavery and violence that made him too threatening to live. His vision of beloved community remains before us and is renewed by the hope and excitement your leadership of the nation gives us. Help us sweep away the blockages under your command as *we keep our eyes on the prize and actively hold on*. We have rolled up our sleeves.