



Together We Can Defeat Giants

Human Rights at Home -- Ending Our System that is Racist by Design

By Terry Collingsworth, Director, International Rights Advocates
tc@iradvocates.org www.IRAdvocates.org

I've been a civil and human rights lawyer for 38 years, and I've seen just about every imaginable form of racism, oppression, and cruelty. I lived through the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, as well as protests around police murdering innocent Black people since then. The cold-blooded murder of George Floyd by criminal cops at this moment of pent up frustration, not with the Covid-19 crisis itself, but its exposure of structural inequities in health care, economic security and disparities of safety, has unleashed a fury of energy and demands for change. I'm concerned that we've all seen this cycle before a sickening number of times, and it will keep happening until massive structural change is made.

I've been struggling to be useful at this moment, and I have been listening to various discussions around the noble protests happening all over the country. We cannot squander this unique moment. The energy and momentum out there can fuel a broad coalition to embrace a clear proposal for major structural change. The protests can't be just over which of the horrible cops who murdered George Floyd will be convicted or what tinkering with police procedures is needed.

Recently, I listened to a Black Minneapolis mother being interviewed at the site where George Floyd was executed by police. She said that years ago, she told her son, who was a track star at his high school, that he could only run "on a track with a track uniform" because it was too dangerous for him to be running on the streets (remember Ahmaud Arbery, the 25-year old man executed on May 7, 2020 by a father-son white supremacist team while he was jogging?). This mother, when asked if she thought our system is broken, replied "No, it is working as it was designed." That was a brilliant statement. It really inspired me to think through what she meant.

This woman was absolutely correct that our system of laws and practices is designed to perpetuate white supremacy and racism, and it's working perfectly. Look at our horrible history and its "progression" on the issue of race. Africans were kidnapped and brought to America in chains and, those who survived the horrid conditions of the middle passage, were sold as property. Slavery was legal and that was our "system." Most of our founding fathers owned slaves and built their fortunes on their blood and sweat. The endowments of some of our country's best universities were built on the backs of slave labor. Thomas Jefferson, one of the chief architects of our system, like many Southern men, raped his female slaves and had children with at least one of them, Sally

Hemmings. James Madison, the principal drafter of our Constitution's Bill of Rights, was a slave-owning plantation owner, and, of course, so was George Washington. The system they designed wasn't broken; it was doing what it was designed to do – allow white people to own and abuse Black people. When any slave disobeyed or challenged the system, they were severely tortured. While it is true that white plantation owners had no incentive to murder the men, women, and children they enslaved, it would have been legal for them to do so.

It took a long and bloody civil war to change “the system” that legalized slavery. There was a brief moment when major progress could have been made—there was a time in the Reconstruction era where Black men held around 1,500 offices in the Southern states, but eventually, pro-slavery whites regained control of their states and implemented Jim Crow laws and practices. The “system” they set up kept most newly-freed Black people uneducated and poor, working as sharecroppers. All aspects of life were segregated, and white land-owners maintained their cheap labor supply through sharecropping. They didn't own their Black workforce, but the conditions were such that most of the former slaves were essentially working for subsistence food. To the extent that Black people were able to attend schools, they went to legally segregated schools that our highest Court, applying the values of our “system,” upheld as legal under the “separate but equal” standard, which was a cynical joke. Any blacks who challenged this new “system” were routinely lynched with enthusiastic participation by local law enforcement officials.

Another long and bloody battle, the Civil Rights movement, was needed to change this “system,” and after decades of struggle, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, among other laws, created the potential for major change. In reaction, whites, those of whom who are still alive who no doubt now support Trump and echo his malice that the protesters today are thugs and looters, marched and rioted to prevent the integration of schools, pools, and other public accommodations. After much conflict, our country settled into a new “system,” one that pretty much continues today. Whites who could afford it privatized their lives and went to private schools, private clubs, restaurants in neighborhoods where whites lived, and fled to the suburbs to leave the decaying inner cities to African Americans. Ironically enough, fairly recently, young white gentrifiers are moving back into the cities and displacing African Americans who are struggling to find affordable housing. And our “system” now? It is primarily Black and Brown people who do the dirty work for wages well below “livable” and are kept there by cruel minimum wage laws that allowed Sam Walton and Jeff Bezos to become billionaires. Black and Brown people have poor health care because their jobs don't provide insurance and they can't afford private insurance. Black and Brown people largely go to criminally underfunded public schools with de facto segregation, thanks to redlining, which reinforces the cycle of poverty that keeps many people in these communities in low wage jobs, providing cheap labor to the corporations owned by the one percenters. Poor white people are encouraged by people like Trump and his many racist role models to hate African Americans (and immigrants), preventing poor *people* from uniting and forcing real change. Many American companies profit off of a new form of slavery: prison labor, and for-profit prisons have created an incentive to lock Black and Brown people in cages. Black people are regularly murdered by racist cops who enjoy virtual immunity for their crimes. That is our “system” today, and as the Minneapolis mother wisely observed, it's working as it was designed.

We must get all people of good conscience to unite around a progressive agenda that will not just tinker at the margins but upend the racist system and replace it with one that provides justice and opportunity on an equal basis to all people. Protesting in reaction to another murder by cops is step one: the harder, bigger step is to unite enough people to gain the political power to build a new system that works for all people not just the (mostly white) rich. Borrowing the key good ideas from the primaries (mostly from Bernie Sanders), here is the start of an agenda for a new system:

1. High quality, well-funded, free public education to all children. I'd personally go further and nationalize private schools – if rich white people had to send their kids to public schools, we would have the best public schools in the world. Furthermore, all public schools must be integrated and equally funded, and pernicious policies like redlining must be completely eradicated.
2. Major reforms to provide a truly livable wage and benefits to all workers and improve protections for workers who want to form trade unions.
3. Universal free medical coverage – Medicare for all. If rich people had to rely on Medicare, we would have a first class public health system.
4. Voting rights reform to make it easier to vote, including by mail, and prevent ongoing voter suppression of Black voters.
5. Tax reform to claw back the tax windfalls that the very rich have received from Trump and implement a fair and progressive tax system that taxes very wealthy people at higher rates than regular working people (unlike now). Billionaires like Jeff Bezos pay virtually no taxes, and that simply must change.
6. Get money out of politics. Overturn Citizens United, no PACs, strict and low limits on individual or corporate donations.
7. Major policing reforms to end the militarized police forces and convert most of those resources to community assistance officers. Get rid of the “qualified immunity” standard for police officer liability and use the same negligence standard the rest of us are bound to. If police officers knew they would be held liable and responsible for unlawful violence, it would stop. Look at working models like Norway for alternatives to our inherently cruel and counterproductive prison system. Our prisons have abandoned any pretense of rehabilitation and instead are designed to torture the inmates, except for those inexcusable country club prisons, where rich “white collar” criminals get to play tennis during their stays.

How do we pay for this? Tax reform and major reductions in military expenditures. How do we achieve it? Step one is to vote out Trump and his Republican enablers, particularly in the Senate. I realize that most progressives are not delighted with the choices we have for President and many democratic seats in the Congress. However, we need to get back political control to have any chance of enacting real change. We must also vote progressives into our local offices. We can spend the next several years deepening our bench with new progressive candidates to lead us into the future. Every prior achievement of major change to the system required protests and sacrifice. Corrupt power is not easily displaced. Let's keep marching towards upending the current racist system.