

Globalism and Race at A16 in D.C.

by Colin Rajah, special to [ColorLines](#)

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Last year's World Trade Organization (WTO) shutdown in Seattle was a historic moment for the growing U.S. movement against corporate globalization. However, the Seattle actions, dazzling as they were, also cast a spotlight on serious issues of race within that movement.

After Seattle, the movement set its sights on mobilizing for the annual Spring meetings of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Washington, D.C. this past April 16. Known as A16, these actions were also hugely successful. Although they did not completely shut down the meetings, the actions mobilized some 20,000 participants, gathered major national and international attention, and sustained the momentum of the anti-corporate globalization movement.

Lingering Whiteness

Yet the whiteness of the movement remained a thorny issue at A16. While Seattle is a relatively white location, D.C. promised a far better opportunity to mobilize people of color: its majority African American population has a long history of international action and other large East Coast populations of color are nearby.

Indeed, a significant number of people of color participated in the D.C. actions, as they had in Seattle. Still, A16 was probably proportionately even whiter--and, since labor departed early--younger than the WTO protests. "A16 was indeed a sea of white," comments Eric Tang of Third World Within (TWW) of New York City.

After the racial critique emerged in Seattle and was substantially analyzed by Elizabeth (Betita) Martinez's widely circulated [ColorLines](#) article, "[Where Was the Color in Seattle?](#)," various attempts were made to mobilize people of color to DC. The Mobilization for Global Justice, the central initiating and organizing coalition for A16, hired Asantewaa Nkrumah-Ture, specifically to do outreach to black communities in D.C.

"The outreach we did was never 'affirmative action.' We answered questions, provided information, and asked for participation. To that extent, we did a very good job and we planted seeds that will bear fruit in the future," Nkrumah-Ture says.

Paternalistic Greetings

Nonetheless, the D.C. mobilization of color was thin. Damu Smith, coordinator of the National Black Environmental and Economic Justice Coordinating Committee and a veteran D.C. international solidarity activist, says that he "was only approached to pass on contacts." Given the meager interest in issues affecting people of color shown by A16 leaders, "I could not drop my ongoing campaigns and plunge myself into A16. Black and Latino leaders were not even asked to speak at the main events, let alone to really help lead the actions."

Luis Sanchez from Youth Organizing Communities (YOC) and Los Angeles Direct Action Network (DAN) describes the weak understanding of some white activists of how to create multi-racial solidarity. "If you go to a DAN meeting and ask, 'Why aren't there people of color here?' they just say, 'We should recruit more,' and that's it."

Eric Tang recounts how the TWW contingent was constantly greeted with white paternalism. "The best they could say was 'Yes! This is what democracy looks like!' Given how white-dominated the scene was, this was deeply insulting to all of us, as if the Third World people in our group were some sort of mere add-on to a struggle being waged by radical white college kids and the environmental movement."

The JustAct youth delegation and Third World Within (TWW) were among the larger organized groups of color at A16. The JustAct delegation included groups from around the country, such as Youth Organizing Communities of Southern California, Student Liberation Action Movement (SLAM) from New York, the Brown Collective of Seattle, the Next Movement of Boston, and the School of Unity and Liberation and Students for Justice of the San Francisco/San Jose area. The TWW contingent was from New York City and included people from the Audre Lourde Center, the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, Youth Force, the New York Metro Black Radical Congress, and others.

A Rallying Point

Both JustAct and TWW's organizing efforts began with people already active within their own communities who led their respective mobilizations. From there, both organizations invested time, energy, and resources to develop an analysis and organizing workshops that were relevant to communities of color. They also made sure that their respective delegations were provided with resources to get to D.C. and housed adequately.

Once in D.C., Mark Rand of JustAct says, "We tried to create space for leadership of communities of color to be exercised within the larger mobilizations." Organizers Jia Ching Chen and Edget Betru convinced St. James Church in D.C. to house 70 youth of color, and to allow the church building to be used as a meeting place, staging area, and strategizing center throughout A16. Hop Hopkins of the Brown Collective says, "You know, in Seattle, the biggest thing was, 'Where are the other people of color?' Here in D.C., we all know we're right here in the basement of this church. Democracy is what we're doing right here."

Emory Smith of the Nhia Project believes that people of color in D.C. "were able to make a statement to America, to the world, that youth of color are concerned about how globalization is happening."

The welcoming atmosphere at St. James Church was absent elsewhere. Irene Tung, a member of the Young Communist League who helped organize a Brown University contingent to D.C. says, "There was definitely an insider's culture at A16, especially at the convergence spaces. There was a vocabulary and behavior, an assumed cultural commonality, that was somewhat eerie. It seems that the ideals of absence of leadership and 'facilitated chaos'--as they say--function best in a homogenous group."

While this movement continues to grow and mobilize this summer for actions at the Democratic and Republican conventions in Los Angeles and Philadelphia, the racial divide needs to be addressed appropriately if the movement is to have legitimacy and broad, lasting impact. Kim Fellner of the National Organizers Alliance argues that, "At this point, there is a need to reorganize power and control in the movement. To say 'Come in and be included' is different than 'We're turning over co-ownership of this organization.' I think the attitude of ownership instead of mere inclusion is critical."

Denise Gaberman of Paper Tiger TV adds that DAN and other organizations could learn from "talking with" rather than "talking to" leaders of color. "Why is DAN not asking older people of color for knowledge and experience?" Eric Tang agrees. "The generation of activists of color who

participated in the anti-imperialist struggles during the 1960s and 1970s could provide a key link between the past and the present."

Luis Sanchez suggests that this responsibility works both ways. "As people of color, we also have to bring these issues back to our communities. It's not just how white organizers deal with us, but at the same time, internally how we deal with educating our own people." Similarly, Tang says, "Raising criticism from the sidelines doesn't get us anywhere. We have to take this work upon ourselves."

According to Sanchez, DAN-LA is the only regional DAN group that has a significant number of organizers of color. DAN-LA will be the principal coordinator of the actions at the Democratic National Convention (also called DNC or D2K) in August. Sanchez sees this as an opportunity to finally have leaders of color in the center of the mobilization. "There is definitely a call out there," says Jasmin de la Rosa, coordinator of the Third Eye Movement, which is organizing hip-hop activists and other high-school youth to participate in L.A.

Sadiqa Yancey of the Next Movement argues, "We need to recognize that this is affecting us. We need to recognize that we're not an island in the cities, in the U.S. These types of things are happening to people all across the world and it's unbelievable what they're doing to our people."

Colin Rajah is director of programs at [JustAct](#), an organization based in San Francisco that promotes youth education and activism for global justice.