# SNCC 40TH Anniversary Conference: The Importance of Building Alliances

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**Panelists**
**Stephon Bowens** - Executive Director, North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers Land Loss Prevention Project

**Angaza Laughinghouse** - President, Black Workers for Justice

**Debbie A. Bell** - SNCC Veteran

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**NOTE:** Video begins with workshop already in progress. **

**Moderator:** ..and I don't know if anybody can tolerate a hour and a half panel, which is what we're prepared to do. So there are a couple of options. We can just suspend with all of it and we can have an evaluation of the conference, or we can do a mini version of what we plan to do and hopefully engage in some discussion on what the panelists have presented and then maybe end up with a slight evaluation or some feedback. So what's the pleasure to folks?

**Audience Member:** I would like to hear what the people were thinking.

**Moderator:** Option two? Consensus, not vote, right? Actually it's supposed to be called, "Where Do We Go From Here?" And as I was telling my friend this morning, it should be, "Where did everybody go?"

I think we knew full well that with such a long weekend that it wasn't likely that we'd have a big participation, but I think what Charles wanted to do was to present some of the local work that's going on. And of course, even some national work, as we see with Debbie's [A. Bell] presentation, not so much as a plan or outline for where we should go, but just some things for people to think about that we think kind of comes out of the spirit of the conference.

But I wish you would indulge me for one minute. Everybody got a chance to tell a SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] story this weekend. So I get to tell mine. I grew up in a house behind Ivanhoe Donaldson. He doesn't remember me. He was five years older. He ran track. He was an athlete, a pretty good runner too. My crew came behind me and wanted to run as well. So we looked up to Ivanhoe as a track star who went off to Michigan State, I believe it was.

We heard he joined the Civil Rights Movement. He went to SNCC and we never saw him again. We never saw him. Really, this is the first time I've seen him since he went off to school. That many years. And so it's kind of—I've been thinking about him all these years. His work was influential.

In 1964 at Bradley University, we got arrested for a sit-in and traffic stoppage, trying to integrate a white barbershop in Peoria, Illinois. In retrospect, I mean, what?! What was it? It was a barbershop that we didn't frequent. We had—we called jackleg barbers in the dormitory that cut our hair, probably a hundred Black students on the campus.[1] But one student who had a pretty nice Afro in 1963 worked with the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and they figured they needed to do this. And so kind of spontaneously we did it and we were arrested.

At that moment, if SNCC had been around and somebody had said, you need to come work with us somewhere in the South, I would've been gone. But it didn't happen. And then I think in 1966, students at Tennessee State were involved in a battle with the state police. Stokely [Carmichael] had been in contact with someone and we formed a Friends of SNCC chapter there and had a demonstration on West Virginia State's campus. And I remember he sent us literature. The Black Panther poster was the prominent thing that he sent and we got it around the campus at that time.

So I didn't get a chance to join SNCC. It's one of the tragedies of my life. But certainly from that point on, [I was] always influenced by the work of SNCC and in later years had an opportunity to meet and work with so many people that are part of a SNCC experience. So kind of like this weekend is like kind of bringing it all together for me personally. And I really appreciate all the people that put it together and that came here.

So what we want to do—it's not an agenda for struggle—but just a little look at what's going on in North Carolina. First, we want to hear from Stephon Bowens who's worked for the Land Loss Fund, to talk a little bit about the struggle of Black farmers, primarily here in North Carolina, but throughout the South and the environmental justice movement.

[1] "Jackleg" is a slang term that generally means unlicensed, self-taught, or informal—often used to describe someone doing skilled work without formal training or certification.

And we kind of think that's fitting. I mean, those of you who had that SNCC experience know how important Black landowners were during that period—bail money, having meetings, and providing even a safe haven from the Ku Klux Klan in so many places, but particularly in Mississippi. So we want to hear about that work that's going on.

And then we're gonna ask Angaza Laughinghouse from the Black Workers for Justice to talk about organizing workers in the South and the importance of unions. And I think he's gonna say a little bit about the African-American Latino Alliance that we are trying to build in this area.

And then finally, we're gonna hear from Debbie Bell from Philadelphia [PA], who's a SNCC veteran from the Atlanta campaigns, who's gonna talk about the Black Radical Congress as a kind of modern-day expression—at least the Black movement's attempts to bring together a coalition or united front of people to fight on a program which many think represents the lessons that we've learned over the last 40 years.

So that's what we've got, and we'll probably ask people to speak maybe for 10 minutes or so at best. And then we'll try to open it up for some discussion—10 minutes or less. Okay. So first we'll have Stephon Bowens.

**Stephon Bowens:** First of all, good afternoon, good afternoon. My name is Stephon Bowens again, and I'm an attorney and the executive director of the North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers Land Loss Prevention Project. We call ourselves Land Loss Prevention for short. And our project was founded in 1983 to try to curb systemic and widespread land loss throughout North Carolina.

Since [19]83, our project has worked feverishly not only to address issues of land loss in North Carolina but to address issues of land loss throughout the Southern region of the United States. More particularly, I was asked to talk today briefly about some of the things that are going on presently as it relates to land loss, as it relates to civil rights, and as it relates to how we improve the state of America. And in doing that, I would be remiss if I didn't talk about the Black farmers.

In 1920, the United States had more than a million Black farmers. Today we have less than 16,000 Black farmers. And that has been through hook, crook, and pilfering of African-American farmland and of the general way in which the American system and the United States system of laws work in some respect to the disadvantage of people who are sometimes language and money poor.

In some real respect, what we've found is that, for example, the United States Department of Agriculture has been a big impediment to the retention of land in the African-American community. And in looking at that, what we really have to think about is what does land mean in America? What does land mean in America?

And for many of us, we think about, well, how can I get my first house and get that one acre of land and, you know, have a decent subdivision where I can raise my children and sustain my family? But as many of us know, and as it was previously alluded to, farmers for the most part had access to land, which meant that they had access to capital. Because land and capital in this United States are synonymous in some very real respects. And holding of land was power.

And in a real respect, the divestment of Black farmers from that land was a divestment of an economic base and of a social power. And so in trying to put the Black farmers in some context in the loss from $1 million [$3.9 million in 2025] 80 years ago, down to $16,000 [$29,887 in 2025]—that translates to a tremendous loss of equity and stake in this country.

We have been representing, most recently, a little bit over 3,000 Black farmers from around the United States—about 500 in North Carolina specifically—against the United States Department of Agriculture for systemic practices of discrimination.

And in looking at those practices of discrimination, just to give you a typical example—and it's all too often heard type of scenario—a farmer comes in for assistance. He's told to sit in the lobby and wait. He's the first one there in the morning. Yet a white farmer comes in two hours later, is given an opportunity to meet with the county supervisor immediately and given the assistance that ultimately, when that Black farmer is seen later that day, is denied.

And that's a typical scenario. And there was a huge class action actually led by two farmers from North Carolina, one named Tim Pigford from the southern portion of the state and one named Cecil Brewington. And both Mr. Pigford and Mr. Brewington were Black farmers who were subjected to tremendous acts of discrimination that I couldn't begin to quantify to you.

Yet to say, not only in—for example, in Mr. Pigford's case—did he lose his farm, his livelihood, his connection to the land, but the manner in which it was done was most horrifying. To find out that you go to the government for assistance that every other American enjoys, and they deny you that very assistance. And then they turn around and foreclose upon your property, and you leave in the morning and come back home, and your doors are locked and shackled. Your children and your wife are told that they can't go in to get personal items like clothes, things of that nature.

And you have a sheriff who's telling you that you have to do the best that you can based on the circumstances that have been presented to you, but by no means, and no circumstances, will you

be allowed to go back into your home and get those things that are important to you and important to your family's livelihood. And you're basically left destitute. That's the struggle of Black farmers right now. They have been left destitute.

I think some have heard the saying of a nation of people without a land. Well, in this case, in the United States, Black farmers are a nation of people without land. And so we're fighting, we're struggling, and we're working very closely with a number of organizations, a number of groups.

For example, the Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association, here based in Tillery, North Carolina, with Gary Grant and some other leaders from around the country—to try to get Black farmers back into agriculture, back into the holding of land, because it's important to rural communities, but it's also important to urban communities because the land base is something that can never be recreated.

We can make a lot of money and we can do a lot of things, but without the land wealth, it's meaningless because the land is one thing that can't be regenerated. And the significance of that land wealth in communities can't be understated.

The second thing I wanted to just briefly touch on before I move away from the Black farmers is the fact that right now there are about 20,000 people who have claimed that there were problems with discrimination at USDA. Of those, about 11,000 cases have already been heard. Of the 11,000 cases, almost 5,200 people have been denied claims under this consent decree.

What that really translates—what was told to the farmers when they applied for this assistance from the government as a result of a class action lawsuit settlement—was that if you could tie your shoe—and I'm not, I'm quoting now lead counsel that represented the farmers: "If you can tie your shoe and you were Black and you farmed in America, you would receive benefit of this agreement."

And you probably received a cash settlement, and you would more than likely, if the land was available that was taken from you by the government, you would receive that land back. Well, I'm here to tell you today that less than 60% of those farmers are receiving the cash settlement. Much less, even less than 20% are receiving any of their land back. So it is, again, a dream deferred.

**Audience Member:** And betrayal.

**Stephon Bowens:** You can say that too.  And I wouldn't argue with you. So we're working diligently with those farmers and they're working hard to try to continue to be that base for society because truly without food and without land, you can't have a fight for struggle and for justice. Truly people don't fight if they're hungry.

The other issue that we work on as an organization is environmental justice. Some call it environmental justice, some call it environmental racism. Call it what you will. What it means to me is the unwanted siting of types of facilities that no one else would want in their community. I'm trying to put this in very plain language.

For some time we represented a community in the southeastern part of North Carolina in a county called Jones County near a town called Pollocksville, in a community called Goshen. Goshen is one of the oldest African-American communities in North Carolina, but also in the United States. It is historically significant. [It] had a historically significant African-American graveyard, yet and still, the town of Pollocksville in Jones County in all of their magnanimity—well all of their splendor—chose to place a wastewater treatment facility in the community of Goshen.

If you know anything about Jones County, and if you know anything about the town of Pollocksville, you know that the town of Pollocksville is 80% white. You know that the community of Goshen is 100% Black. You also find that the residents of the Goshen community—this is the most interesting, and in my opinion, the most damning thing that could be said about the placement of this facility—were never given notice and opportunity to be heard on the placement of this facility.

But more importantly, weren't even going to receive the benefits of this wonderful facility which was bestowed upon them. In other words, we're gonna take our crap, for lack of a better word, and we're going to put it in your community. But not only are we gonna put it in your community, we're gonna spray it on fields adjacent to your land, where you grow your crops that you feed your family with. And we're gonna tell you it's okay.

Well, the Goshen community created a community action team called GREAT: Goshen Road Environmental Action Team. And this community team worked diligently with other groups and other organizations from around the state and around the country to try to stop this facility, Land Loss being one of them.

And I have to say, this was one that we didn't win. This is one where the facility is up and running. And unfortunately, the residents of Goshen are receiving the waste treatment from the town of Pollocksville, despite the fact that the town of Pollocksville had the opportunity to place it, for example, on a 600-acre former plantation where there was only one owner who was known in the community.

Despite the fact that this particular facility is being placed in a community where there were a number of people and a number of residents who would have been impacted, this facility is up and running and all the efforts and the lobbying, the marching, the complaining in this incident were to no avail.

We argued before the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals in January. And it was very striking. The argument before the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals for the United States was very simple. You know how sometimes they say lawyers argue about the facts when the law isn't on their side, and then they say they argue about the law when the facts are on their side? Well, in this case, I had the pleasure of arguing about the facts and the law, 'cause both were on my side.

In this case, whenever a justice asked me a question, I could point to them specific facts about why the council didn't send notice to this community about where they were gonna place this facility. In each instance, I could point to specific facts about how the notice was supposed to go out under the law and the fact that it didn't.

Yet the one thing that I couldn't do was ensure that the law is going to be interpreted fairly and appropriately. And in this case it wasn't. And it's amazing to me to be able to see the machinations that the Court of Appeals went through to deny this community an opportunity to live in a safe and healthy community and enjoy the benefits of society that all of us should enjoy.

Finally, I wanted to talk very briefly about the Holly Springs landfill case, which is another environmental justice case that we became involved in. Some of you who are from Holly Springs may be aware. Some of you who are from North Carolina may be aware of Holly Springs. Holly Springs is a growing bedroom community of Raleigh. It's just about 15 minutes away from here, a little bit less than 13 miles from right from this very point.

Holly Springs in the early eighties was a predominantly African-American community. And since then the growth of Wake County has begun to spread out into Holly Springs. Well, prior to the growth coming to Holly Springs, Wake County decided that they needed a new landfill. Not only did they need a new landfill, but they needed the largest landfill in the Southeastern United States.

So they went about developing plans and receiving approvals and obtaining permits to place this landfill in the Holly Springs community. And in 1990, they began that process. In 1992, the process was formalized, and they waited until 1996 to really begin the process of developing the landfill. In 1998, the Land Loss Prevention Project was approached by a number of local groups, including the NAACP and other community leaders, to look at this issue of the siting.

Well, what was significant about the siting in Holly Springs? The significance was that there were at least five other existing landfills within the community already. The significance was that the location of the landfill was beside an old landfill that had previously been closed because it was an unlined landfill.

And of course, unlined landfills have numerous health hazards associated with them. And the residents of that community were then going to be asked to bear the burden, if you will, of a new

landfill, which would be the largest landfill in the Southeastern United States. And certainly had the potential for taking unwanted trash from other states.

With that in mind, the residents of Holly Springs got together and challenged and petitioned, had open public meetings, and issues related to the siting. And when that went to no avail and the permit was ultimately approved, we filed an action in the Office of Administrative Hearings. And ultimately that was successful. The administrative law judge ruled in our favor, in our clients' favor, on every single issue raised.

Now, what you might have heard most recently, if you kept up with the newspapers, is that the Holly Springs case was appealed to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. And that DENR [Department of Environment and Natural Resources] in fact ruled in our favor. What you may not know is that they reversed every single point and finding of fact that the administrative law judge made in our favor, in our clients' favor, and essentially created a mechanism in ruling in our favor by which they could argue that they have adhered to environmental justice.

Because the only issue that remains—the only issue that prevented DENR from going forward with issuing the permit two weeks ago—was simply that Wake County did not do the requisite things under the Environmental Justice Act, which provided them to do a socioeconomic status survey and study to determine whether or not there were issues that were related to socioeconomic factors that may adversely impact the appropriateness of the siting of the facility.

So essentially all Wake County has to do at this point—at least their argument would be—is to go back and do that study and then rubber stamp the siting of the facility. So in some respects, one may argue that's a victory, and we take victories nonetheless, but in some respects, it's a victory with some real serious and long-lasting ramifications. And at this point, the case is in the court. It's going to Superior Court. Wake County's going to appeal their denial, and we're going to appeal the issues that were overturned.

But finally, I'll say that the issue is not that you have litigation going, but it's that you have litigation, you have political action, it's that you have social action going, and you have a multifaceted approach to dealing with issues, as well as having a community-based sense of encouraging and empowering you to be engaged in these issues as they arise. And that is going to be the key to ensuring that issues of social justice, economic justice, and environmental justice are met at this time.

**Moderator:** So there are some chairs in the front row. Okay. Angaza Laughinghouse, the Black Workers for Justice.

**Angaza Laughinghouse:** First I'd like to extend to everybody just very warm, heartfelt greetings, because this has been a very special event. Some very special people. I really sort of enjoyed this very inspirational celebration and educational opportunity. Just wanted to say that.

But I would like to address just basically three main developments here in the South, particularly here in North Carolina, and want to give it some context. The main thing that we've been talking about has really been the 40 years of struggle against Jim Crow segregation and the role SNCC and some of these great visionaries have played in helping us lead that fight.

But as we all know, the other side of the coin in this whole struggle for democracy has been one for democracy in the workplace. You know, the struggle for workers' rights, the struggle for a living wage, and I want to make sure that all of us understand the legacy that has been left by right-to-work, by this segregation, as you know, continues to deny us this basic democracy in the workplace.

So, in addressing those issues, I just think it's important that we be mindful that that's the context. The struggle against right-to-work is still a struggle for democracy—regarding democracy, particularly in the workplace. But I've just been privileged, man, to work with many folks around North Carolina, particularly the members of Black Workers for Justice over the last 19 years. And also had an opportunity to work with Farmworker Legal Services and a couple unions as an organizer.

That has really been insightful in terms of just understanding how monumental these struggles are—these struggles in these three areas are. But we like to first maybe try to address the question of the struggle around the right of public service workers to unionize and their right to collective bargaining rights.

I know way back in the 1980s, that was one of the things that the Black Workers for Justice had attempted to do. They attempted to try to develop workplace organizations, organizing committees, and unions in the public service sector. And it's been a long fight, a very long, difficult fight, because of the political climate—the Jesse Helms climate, the Confederate flag-waving climate—that has made it very, very difficult.[2]

But I think that the founding of UE 150, the North Carolina Public Service Workers Union, has really been just a monumental advance in this particular fight.[3] And I think it's part of that fight. It's an ongoing fight. It's not only to organize workers into the union, but also taking up the fight for the right for collective bargaining, which again requires building a very strong

[2] Jesse Helms (1921–2008) was a long-serving U.S. Senator from North Carolina (1973–2003) known for his staunchly conservative and segregationist positions.

[3] UE 150 is part of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) and was established to represent public sector workers—many of them Black—in a right-to-work state with laws restricting collective bargaining, making its formation a notable act of resistance and empowerment.

labor-community alliance. Not just within the African-American community, the white community, but particularly with the growing Latino community.

And again, I'm trying to rush through this 'cause I want to get some feedback from it. Which brings us to the question of the long fight for organizing agricultural workers here in the South, particularly here in North Carolina. I recall in 1983, when I first had an opportunity to work with Farmworker Legal Services, and I remember the Black Workers for Justice attempted to start organizing in packing houses also, and poultry plants. And again, very challenging.

Many of you heard of the Hamlet Imperial food fire.[4] I think that represents some of the conditions and the need and also the fear that exists amongst workers. Any of you who are familiar with the 25 workers that burned up in that poultry plant out of fear of challenging their boss—putting those locks on those fire exit doors—again, this has been a very long, difficult fight.

It's been a fight that again requires a certain sort of political climate. And I just think that we're moving in that direction as we try to build an alliance and community—a community-labor alliance that also includes the Latino brothers and sisters in the workplace. I just think that's critically important. But particularly the fight that FLOC, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, has led—particularly their boycott—how many y'all familiar with the boycott of Mount Olive Pickles?[5] Raise your hand, give some idea.

The Farm Labor Organizing Committee of the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor - Congress of Industrial Organizations] and over 5,000 workers in North Carolina have been fighting to gain a labor agreement that has been initiated by this boycott of the Mount Olive Pickle plant here in Mount Olive, North Carolina.

The Black Workers for Justice have been participating in that boycott, trying to educate folks and actually going to some of the grocery stores and trying to educate many of the workers as well as the consumers about this particular boycott. And it was initiated in March [19]99. And I think the main thing is that we all have to try to support this particular boycott.

But more important, as you know, in terms of trying to organize many of these workers, is the question of—many of the workers, as you know, are migrant workers, some legal, some illegal. And as you know, that too is very divisive in terms of how the bosses use that to try to undermine the particular organizing effort.

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[4] The Hamlet chicken processing plant fire occurred on September 3, 1991, in Hamlet, North Carolina, when a fire broke out at the Imperial Food Products plant. The blaze killed 25 workers and injured many more, making it one of the worst industrial disasters in U.S. history.

[5] Launched in the late 1990s, the Mount Olive Pickle boycott targeted the North Carolina-based company for refusing to negotiate with farmworkers and their representatives. FLOC's campaign demanded better wages, working conditions, and recognition for migrant laborers harvesting cucumbers. The boycott ultimately succeeded in 2004, resulting in a historic three-way agreement among FLOC, growers, and Mount Olive Pickle Co.—a landmark in Southern labor organizing.

One of the things that's really critically important for all of us is to try to understand why we must all make a call for just general, unconditional amnesty for all undocumented workers. ’Cause otherwise, as we try to organize in these workplaces—whether pickle plants, poultry plants, where a lot of our Latino brothers and sisters are presently working—it just makes it a lot easier for the boss to split our unity and prevent us from organizing unions in various workplaces.

So one of the things that comes out of these struggles is the need for solidarity. And the Black Workers for Justice has always upheld that solidarity is a question of necessity, not one of gratitude and one of just doing someone a favor. In order for us to win these fights, we need that type of solidarity. It's a necessity.

And as a result of that perspective, the Black Workers for Justice has initiated building an alliance of African-American and Latino workers—the African-American Latino Workers Alliance—as an effort to strengthen these two very important fights in the public sector, where more and more Latino workers too are coming into the service sector of the public sector, as well as in the agricultural area.

We're asking all folks to support this petition drive that we have going on. I just want to share with you what this petition’s about. It's a petition to President Clinton and the U.S. Congress, calling for a grant of unconditional amnesty for all undocumented workers, and also to ratify an International Labor Organization convention that addresses the fundamental rights of all workers to:

Number one—their right to freedom of association, their right to organize. Also their right to recognize the collective bargaining rights that all workers should have. And finally, to defend the human rights of all migrant workers.

Before all of you leave, I’d like you all to either sign one of these petitions, or if it’s possible, to take one of these petitions and to have friends and supporters and your coworkers sign these petitions. And I want to make sure that all of you either get a chance to do that before you leave here today. And there's an address on these petitions where you can send them back. You can just send them back to the Black Workers for Justice address that's on the top of the petition.

The other point I just want to touch on is just the question of globalization and why it’s important we try to develop a broader international perspective on what’s going on with working people today. I had an opportunity over the last few years to work with UNITE—Union of Needle trades, Industrial, and Textile Employees—and some textile plants in the western part of the state. And it’s amazing what the Gulf American Free Trade Agreement globalization has done to

what was left of that part of the state.[6] We really don't have a lot of industry other than furniture and textiles.

In order for workers to develop that sort of international consciousness and understanding, the Black Workers for Justice has seen the importance of trying to make sure that there's some sort of educational piece going on to sort of broaden that understanding of why globalization is something that we all gotta try to get a handle on—understanding in terms of how it impacts us and why we gotta build broader international solidarity with workers abroad.

So as a result, over the last couple of years, the Black Workers for Justice has convened an international workers school. That was a phenomenal experience. Brother [indistinct] and others probably attended those two particular schools. There was an opportunity to really learn firsthand from our sisters and brothers from Britain, Germany, South Africa, Brazil, and many of these other places where the auto industry is running and our textile plants are running, to just see the devastation that globalization has really meant for all workers in terms of lowering the standard of living for workers.

I just think it's very important that folks really support these efforts here in the South—the efforts to support the right of all public service workers to unionize and have collective bargaining rights; the right of agricultural workers to organize the agricultural sector; and also the critically important issue of building this alliance with the Latino community.

In closing—'cause I really want to have an opportunity to hear questions and have some dialogue on these particular questions, 'cause they're critically important. And I know the BWFA has been struggling, the Black Workers for Justice has been struggling with trying to answer some of the important questions of how to build the broader political climate. And as you all know, all of us have a role to play in building that broader political climate and building support for these particular struggles.

So in closing, I'd just like to say that it's really been an honor, man, to have been a part of this development and to work with some of the best organizers, really, that I've ever had an opportunity to work with—labor organizers, community organizers—and looking forward to just hearing some of your comments and questions.

**Moderator:** I think part of our perspective on this panel is at least that this is a conference that comes to reflect on and honor a life and death struggle in the South that was initiated 40-some-odd years ago, and that we certainly ought to look at what are the conditions in the same areas today. And that's pretty much a sense of what we've tried to do, at least from hearing from the first two presenters.

[6] Gulf American Free Trade Agreement globalization devastated already struggling parts of the state by accelerating job loss, undermining local industries, and deepening economic dislocation.

Our third presenter, Debbie Bell, is going to talk about some organizational developments in the Black liberation movement. And I might argue—and others might too—that in many ways it represents an extension of what it was that SNCC sought out to do many, many years ago. So, Debbie Bell.

**Debbie Bell:** He took my opening line away. But that's alright. We learned to be creative. It's part of the Ella Baker teachings. Yes, I don't think it's arguable. But to follow up on that, I also note just by sitting on this panel and from some of the discussions that have taken place during the course of the last four days, that people are in motion, and people are trying to change their communities.

But the thing that the Black Radical Congress is trying to address—or the issue that the Black Radical Congress is trying to address—is how do we unite? How do we coalesce all of these energies so that we're not just chipping away at our one little corner. So the issues that were just presented to you are issues that fall within the purview of the Black Radical Congress agenda.

Let me take a step back and give you a little background. First, on the name—the Black Radical Congress has been, or is basically in formation to try to give a vehicle for anyone who considers themselves, one, Black—whether they're blonde, blue-eyed, or African or whatever. But if you self-define yourself as Black, then you are eligible to participate. So it does not have a rigid definition of how many crinkles we have in your hair. Although that was one of the discussions, by the way.

And it is an attempt to bring together the full spectrum of Black people on the left, so that all avenues or spokes of radicalism can unite with whatever the issues are. And we have tried to bring these issues under an umbrella—a working umbrella—so that your issue is not isolated from all of the issues that affect the Black community.

Within that umbrella, as part of this radicalism, we clearly state in both the two formal documents that we have—our Principles of Unity and the Freedom Agenda—we state that capitalism does not work, and that it is not an alternative for the African-American community. And it's not an alternative because of its history of oppression. And it hasn't shown that it's going to reform itself or that it can be reformed. That this is not an option for freedom for the Black community.

So with that premise, we are trying to organize. We're not looking to overthrow the government—yet, obviously—but there is a significant left body of thought that has never moved in the same direction. And oftentimes it's been antagonistic to each other.

Juneteenth of 1998, we had an exploratory conference that was held in Chicago, and that conference was to—by our estimate—draw about 500 people to begin to explore what are the possibilities of getting this whole diaspora of left thinking together and beginning to form an

organization. Well, not 200, but 500 people showed up. Two thousand people showed up. So it far exceeded what we had expected. And it also told us that the interest and the need was out there, and that something needed to be done.

The period between [19]98 and today has been a period of local organizing, of ideological discussion, and some strategy development. In that period, there has been a sort of a metamorphosis, a genesis of all these divergent left forces—one moving from a period of skepticism and looking over their shoulder, not quite sure what the next person was going to do and not quite sure where you wanted to go—to a period of, I think, a state of confidence and beginning to trust. Which means then you're in a stage where you can now move forward and build.

In that light, we had planned an educational conference, which I think, having had the marvelous experience that I had this weekend, will somewhat mirror in many ways some of the discussions we heard in terms of how SNCC was built. Because the purpose of this conference—which will take place at Wayne State on the weekend of June 25th, 26th, and 27th—the purpose of that will be—it's called an organizing conference—to teach ourselves how we can organize to carry out the agenda that we have set for ourselves.

And it will be a working Congress in order to learn the skills and share the information that we need to go back home and hopefully start building and touching those people who feel that they want to move in a direction or change.

What are some of the issues we have? It's interesting. In discussing issues, everyone has their own pet issue. And we've gone through that. This one thinks theirs is the most important issue that's going to change the country, and the next one thinks theirs is. But in reality, what we know is that all issues are interrelated, one way or the other.

The farm question is related to the reparation question, to the education question, to the police state question, and so forth. There is something that—there is some strand that you can find that will connect all of these issues. And those are the main issues in which we have chosen to begin to develop a program around.

And, for instance, almost all of what we call local organizing committees—and there are 16 local organizing committees that we have established since 1998—almost all of them are working on anti-police state issues, primarily the cases of Mumia [Abu-Jamal] and Assata [Shakur]. However, we know that in New York, while they might be working on Mumia, they are also working on [Amadou] Diallo. And that is the, you know—and that is the kind of latitude and also the creativity that we would like to have in our LOCs [Local Organizing Committees].

New York has two LOCs. The other LOC has chosen to work on anti-police state, Mumia, and education. And the relationship there is that if you can improve the education system and work for quality, free public education—and by the way, the premise here is that public education must be saved. It is one of the last bastions of democracy that we have in our country—that with education, then there's the possibility of getting a job.

And then the whole question of the police—of not the police state, but of the criminal justice—and what happens to young Black men, certainly will lessen, if not become a moot point, because people will have a purpose in life. And it will help to cut some of the criminal activity that people find necessary in order to survive in this country.

We have LOCs that are working on criminal justice and the question of reparations. And this is for those of you who are not quite plugged into this question of reparations, or if it has not become part of your daily work and daily thought—has become an increasingly important arena of struggle. And more and more literature is written almost on a daily basis. And certainly if you go onto the internet, there are many, many avenues and many articles, pardon me, that give clear, succinct, and rational arguments to the question of reparations, including where the money would go and who would be the recipient of such reparations.

And finally, but not least in terms of issues, is the question that was so well discussed under the Black Workers for Justice program, and that is economic justice. And this is where our distrust of capitalism takes its sharpest turn—here, or connection. And that is that workers are the overwhelming majority of our population. Black people are overwhelmingly in the working class. The working class is anyone who has a boss and earns a wage and is not in control of where their wages are coming from.

And the exploitation—particularly of people of color—in our economic system has just been stated. I don't need to repeat. But this is a question that is paramount. And it's paramount for the growing numbers of people who are only being employed in McDonald-type wage jobs, and have to work two and three jobs in order to put bread on their table and a roof over their head.

So those are our main areas. And let me just go back and I want to just say that the question of a living wage—I need to include under economic justice—because if you don’t have a living wage, there is no economic justice. And this is what affects most people of color. And by the way, in terms of workers, we include those people who are unemployed, underemployed, and all of the millions of women who have been thrown off the welfare rolls and still don’t have any kind of job. They are potential workers, and we need to look at them as potential workers and as allies.

One of the places that the racial discrimination and prejudice is most easily identifiable—is in the workplace, because of the types of jobs and opportunities that are available to African-Americans.

I don’t want to go on too much longer, but I do want to say that the BRC [Black Radical Congress] is a membership organization. It has a sliding scale of membership—for those who are unemployed, to those who would like to give us a whole lot of money. You’re certainly welcome. And that, to date, the composition of our membership is across the economic and intellectual spectrum. So we have intellectuals such as Cornel West, and we have people who are unemployed. We have students. And we are certainly eager to have everyone who's interested join us.

We have a number of websites. And the reason for this is that we have found that on the question of Black radicalism and on any given issue—and our websites, by the way, one of our websites will have an issue for a given period of time— (VIDEO ENDS MID SENTENCE)