

The Synergy of Struggles: DC Statehood and Human Rights

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The approach of our non-voting Delegate to the House, Eleanor Holmes Norton, to winning voting representation and statehood has been highly problematic, more part of the problem than a contribution to an effective struggle for full democracy. Along with her demand to end federal taxation without representation, her proposal for "virtual statehood" that includes the demands for voting representation, budgetary and legislative autonomy, are all unlikely to be passed by Congress in the near future, but even if implemented would be subject to cancellation in any future Congressional session. The very offer to trade a part of our democratic rights for money in the form of federal tax exemption is itself an insult to DC residents. Moreover, in the very unlikely event that federal tax exemption would be passed by Congress, such an exemption would mainly benefit the wealthy and be an invitation for accelerated gentrification as wealthy tax dodgers move in. In addition, her strategy of winning full voting representation without full democracy is itself a diversion from the struggle for statehood itself. In the unlikely event that full representation alone will be achieved, apparently possible only by a Constitutional Amendment, a formidable obstacle would thereby be created to achieving full democracy in the form of DC Statehood. Likewise the prospect is bleak for passage of Norton's bill for a non-resident tax credit that would generate some \$400 million in additional revenue for the District, less than 1/4 of our obligated but denied federal payment (cut off by virtue of the Revitalization Act she supported in 1997). Her collusion with Gingrich in the creation of the Control Board is another example of her negative record with respect to furthering the struggle for self-determination. While some may argue in her defense that she prevented an even more egregious erosion of our political rights under Home Rule, I submit she should have at the very least brought the choices forward for public discussion in town meetings in every ward before concluding the nefarious deal with Newt presented at their love-in at Eastern High School (we could dream of a Delegate who would use the resources of her office to actually organize mass resistance!).

Just updated, the platform of DC Statehood Green Party (DCSGP) avoids the false promises of "virtual statehood" and voting representation without achieving full democracy that would make us equal to citizens of all the other states of the United States: "We demand statehood which would give us democracy and self-government including: Local authority within the District over our three branches of government: legislative, executive and judicial. The elimination of all Federal government committees and sub-committees that have oversight or appropriation power over D.C. government. Complete and equal voting representation in the United States Congress." But why hasn't the movement for full democracy for our citizens achieved its objective by now? The main theme I am arguing here is that there is a profound synergy between

the struggles for political, social and economic human rights, that a campaign for statehood, that is for our political rights, is unwinnable in the near future without the linkage of all three aspects of the human rights struggle.

While our colonial status has been a significant factor in the assaults on our human rights, consider this: the horrible health statistics of the District and indices of growing income inequality are similar to those of Baltimore, Atlanta, and Detroit. Why? An explanation arguably includes the heritage of racism and segregation, deindustrialization (especially for Baltimore and Detroit), and more recently the impact of globalization on U.S. urban centers. The latter has entailed a global restructuring of cities in the "North" to more and more resemble the colonial cities of the periphery of the "South" (1). This restructuring includes increasing segregation by race and class and increasing income inequality, with low paying service jobs being filled by recent immigrants. However, the District has a unique opportunity not available to the other U.S. cities with similar income gaps: it can become a city state with same powers as any other state, and thereby focus its resources, including a future federal payment to radically address its human needs a la "urbanisme vert", green urbanism (thanks to Scott McLarty for this insight). Statehood will be a major part of the solution because its attainment demands linkage to struggles for economic and social human rights.

In 1999, the latest data available from IRS, some 75% of District taxpayers earned less than \$50,000/year (adjusted gross income). Most of this population constitutes the working class majority of the District, and I include in this category a large fraction of the so-called middle class, the working poor and TANF recipients and of course most of the recent immigrant population, documented and undocumented. They along with small business people have the most to gain from statehood, but have been largely unorganized by either labor or democracy advocates. Part of the problem is the effect of stagnant or even declining real incomes of this majority in the last decade (while the income of the wealthy has been booming), bringing many below the self-sufficiency level, that is above the federal poverty level but insufficient to pay the bills in a city with an eroding stock of affordable housing.

The Self-Sufficiency Standard is a far more realistic measure of a minimum adequate income for individuals and families to get by in the District than the federal poverty level (The Self-Sufficiency Standard for the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area, 1999, Diana Pearce and Jennifer Brooks, Wider Opportunities for Women). For example, the annual income required to cover all costs without public or private subsidies to be truly self-sufficient is \$19-36K above the federal poverty level for a family of four (two adults, two children; the range depends on the age/needs of the children). Approximately 50% of D.C. residents live in families below the self-sufficiency level (data from 1997-1999 Census Bureau, compiled by Ed Lazere, CBPP). With many working class residents having two to three jobs to make ends meet, thereby maintaining "self-sufficiency", little time or energy is left to go to meetings or demonstrations. Is it a surprise that very few turn out to support statehood and related issues? Another factor contributing to their political inactivity is the failure of the regional trade union movement to energize their participation by systematic political education coupled with a proactive agenda addressing their broad range of needs. I am confident that organized labor will ultimately take its rightful place at the head of a countervailing movement to corporate power in the

District, but hopefully sooner than later! In this regard, the labor community coalition that has emerged to save DC General is a very hopeful development.

The intersection of race and class is critical to understanding the dynamics of District political economy (of course I am using the term "race" to describe the social construct so central to the reproduction of U.S. ruling class hegemony; skin color differences and other features as well as the social/cultural histories of each group permit racial identification but not the basis for any valid biological racial classification). The "chocolate" city is becoming vanilla, though still mocha (African Americans still constitute the majority of DC residents, about 60%). The violations of human rights in the District are profoundly racist given the racial composition of the recipients of the most egregious effects of these violations, particularly children of color (see Appendix for documentation). This institutionalized racism is "an emperor with no clothes" outside the acceptable political discourse to the media opinion makers. Increasing polarization of rich and poor divides the community along both class and race lines.

Of course, given the political economy of U.S. capitalist society, our local elected government has always shaped its legislative agenda within the constraints of predominant corporate power. However, in the 1970s major gains were won for the working class majority in the District, achieved through the countervailing power of local labor and grassroots organizing by the newly emerged DC Statehood Party led by Julius Hobson, Jo Butler, Hilda Mason and others energized by the civil rights and antiwar movements. These gains included rent control, albeit its loopholes, and of course municipal and federal employment. The erosion of labor's influence with the rise of Reaganomics in the 1980s, with neoliberal globalization on the ascendancy set the stage for the Control Board regime.

Up to recently with the campaign to save DC General, the political discourse has been dominated by advocates of the corporate agenda, albeit with a "bowtie spin" claiming to serve all residents. Since 1994, devastating budget cuts in the social safety net for our children, poor, disabled and elderly were forced by the Control Board with the unfortunate compliance of our elected District government. **The Control Board was created by Congress on the pretext of eliminating a large budget deficit. But the real agenda of this unelected body has become clear: to lubricate the wheels of finance capital, by promoting privatization, weakening income security for workers and the poor, increasing economic inequality and the "misery index", neoliberal globalization come home.**

Mayor Tony Williams was the Chief Financial Officer ("CFO") of the unelected Control Board. As CFO he recommended the hurtful budget cuts in the safety net, with the general compliance of our elected District government. Our mainstream media, projected this new arrival to DC, with significant financial backing by individuals and organizations associated with regional corporate interests (the Federal City Council), into the Mayor's office. The working class majority, particularly east of the Anacostia River, was demoralized by the neoliberal assaults that remained largely unchallenged by any on the Council (with his weak record and program, Chavous could not bring out the Barry vote that would have beaten Williams in the Democratic Primary in 1998). With growing

gentrification and migration of affluent whites into and the black working class out of the District, our City Council is moving to a vanilla complexion. Now Catania is being mentioned as an attractive candidate for the next Mayor by some media pundits, and even by politicians who have articulated the centrality of race in District politics, and in spite of his conservative record on economic issues (e.g., a leading advocate for the Tax Parity Act of 1999, the tax cut for the wealthy).

Our politicians have a convenient subtext to divide our working class which is predominantly people of color: the "undesirables", i.e., the so-called "underclass" of welfare recipients. It is no accident that the Mayor and Council emphasize attracting "middle class" residents back to the District. A real anti-poverty program with necessary local funding from the substantial tax base of the wealthy is simply not an option for these technocrats carrying out the neoliberal agenda of the Federal City Council. Our Mayor and many Council members pander to anti-welfare prejudice, almost always with gestures of real concern for the homeless. The following remarks by Frances Fox Piven are right on target with respect to this issue:

"The ruling class has kept working poor and welfare recipients divided by focusing welfare policy on the alleged behavioral defects of welfare recipients. Rather than debating welfare reform in terms of socio-economic conditions that force people to welfare, mainstream and conservative policy makers vilify recipients and blame their welfare dependency on laziness, irresponsibility and stupidity. To the extent that working people buy into these stereotypical myths about recipients, they will never see themselves as having the same interests, despite the fact that many are only a paycheck away from homelessness themselves... Welfare doesn't regulate the morality of the poor; it is a labor market institution. It has a systemic impact, and the moral issues have only to do with the fairness of the choices that women are facing, and not with whether these women are moral! Public assistance creates a floor under working wages... The lower the floor for income protection programs, the lower our wages... We need to win back the social safety net programs and make them better... Unions need to organize workfare workers." (9/27/97. Piven is the author of *Regulating the Poor*, and *Poor People's Movements*)

With the significant increase in the immigrant population particularly from Central America and Indochina, new scapegoats are now available to foster disunity in the District working class. These new and old sources of disunity need to be addressed in a creative and systematic approach in political organizing and education.

The working class majority will be energized and organized by addressing issues that most impact their lives, i.e., employment, housing, economic security, health, education, taxation, criminal and urban environmental injustice. Success is contingent on creating and expanding the institutional resource base needed for organizing, derived particularly from organized labor and black churches, along with progressive foundations and the social service sector (but beware of political strings attached, particularly from corporate-linked boards!). The political establishment should be challenged to stand up for human needs rather than cater to the corporate agenda, by utilizing the full rights remaining under eroded Home Rule. We in the DC Statehood Green Party believe that the Democratic/Republican establishment will not fulfill the

expectations of the social and economic justice movements which will turn increasingly to our Party as their electoral expression if we are immersed in their struggles. We are certainly now moving effectively in this direction by our participation in the save DC General, housing, education, criminal injustice, and trash transfer coalitions etc. But success will require qualitatively new levels of Party building, recruitment of creative talent and expertise, broader coalitions etc.

While we recognized the reality of dictatorial powers of the Control Board, we never accepted the legitimacy of this antidemocratic "Junta" which imposed devastating budget cuts impacting on children, the poor, elderly, the disabled, municipal workers and our university UDC. We resisted its authority and its instruments by both mobilization and legal challenge, by attempting to organize a progressive political movement and majority coalition independent of the Democratic and Republican Party machinery. The budget deficit has been used to explain the necessity of balancing the budget on the back of low income residents. Since the imposition of the Control Board, our elected officials told us there is no alternative since we had to balance the budget under Control Board legislation. However, we have been "sold a bill of goods". The Council and Mayor consistently maintained that their "hands are tied", hiding behind the disinformation regarding our local tax base and rhetorical support for a commuter tax that Congress blocks. Our elected leadership continued to submit to the Control Board dictatorship - the alternative was always resistance, with our elected officials, including our delegate to Congress giving moral and political leadership.

For example, the Mayor/City Council could have sent forward its own recommended budget to Congress, instead of an austerity joint consensus budget with the Control Board, increasing rather than cutting funding to essential programs, while still balancing the budget, a requirement of the Control Board legislation. Budgets could have been balanced by restructuring our local taxes, drawing needed revenue from the real tax base of the District, the booming income of the wealthy, as well as a reorientation away from economic development driven from the corporate sector (e.g., Convention Center). Instead the Tax Parity Act of 1999, a tax cut strongly favoring business and wealthy individuals, was passed; according to latest CFO projections, when fully phased in Tax Parity will reduce revenue by a cumulative total of nearly \$1 billion.

In 2000 when Chavous was urged to support repeal of Tax Parity, he said there was no guarantee that even \$1 billion in extra revenue would be used for programs beneficial to the people of the District. True, but it is hard to imagine how such extra revenue could be generated without empowering the working class majority of the District going hand in hand with their articulation of new priorities for the budget and economic development. In the hypothetical and unlikely event that Congress suddenly passes say Norton's tax credit for non-resident employees, giving us a \$400 million windfall in extra revenue, under the present political regime it is likely that most would go to programs fostering further gentrification and economic development following the agenda of the Federal City Council.

Changing the District's budgetary priorities requires empowerment of those who would benefit most by such change.

Until the District achieves statehood or temporary budgetary and legislative autonomy, all legislation is subject to Congressional review. But here is where real leadership from a future Delegate to Congress and progressive City Council and Mayor comes in, building a broad coalition of labor, child advocates, churches and their allies, a coalition that could mobilize militant direct action, "lighting a fire" under Congress. The offices of our elected officials should be organizing centers for this activity! Every lever available under the Home Rule Charter should be used in the struggle for achieving human rights in the District. There was never an excuse for our elected officials to stand paralyzed and compliant before the authority of the Control Board and Congress. Can we blame this cowardice on a neocolonial psychology? Perhaps in part, but our elected leaders with rare exceptions were always beholden to the campaign contributions and agenda of the regional corporate elite. Now thanks to the pressure of labor community coalition to save DC General, and the imminent demise of Control Board oversight (?), the Council has shown some signs of resistance to the Mayor and Control Board dictates.

But we face a formidable challenge. With a growing lack of affordable housing for most residents, the construction of luxury apartments and the Convention Center is highest on the agenda of real estate interests in the District. If unchallenged by an effective labor community coalition, "economic resurgence" will continue to benefit the wealthy while driving out the working class of the District.

With the Control Board gone, the regional corporate agenda will still be imposed on the District unless the power of a labor community coalition is asserted. The assertion of this countervailing power is an immediate priority. While all U.S. citizens should have voting representation in Congress, I submit that statehood should not be supported for a hypothetical future District that is predominantly affluent and white; retrocession would be the just solution for this future (does Orange County, California deserve statehood?).

There are of course other dimensions to our struggle for statehood, particularly gaining regional, national and international solidarity. Support of Maryland and Virginia residents, including many of those who work in the District could be encouraged by a regional Green Party approach to reciprocal income taxation. For example, an urban/suburban reciprocal tax scheme could be designed to be more progressive than current state tax structures. The Freedom Bus to Denver and later follow-up effectively focused on gaining national attention to our denial of political rights. DC Statehood is included as a plank in the national Pro-Democracy Campaign's Voters' Bill of Rights. Violations of economic and social rights should be made more prominent in building national solidarity, joining in the national effort to focus on these violations (see <http://www.kwru.org/>, The Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign). The systematic violation of our political, social and economic human rights in the District should not only be a local focus of organizational activity but also must be made an international source of extreme embarrassment for the U.S. government. It is high time to make these violations an international issue by exposing the hypocrisy of the President and the State Department, who preach human rights to everyone else on the globe, "protected" of course under its umbrella of military force and economic/political

blackmail. The DC Statehood Green Party working with the Green Party of the United States will increase the opportunity of achieving this goal by facilitating international awareness through the global green party network.

The DC Statehood Green Party joined by Standup for Democracy have launched a global online petition to the UN Commission on Human Rights for DC Statehood and Human Rights. Sign it and spread the news to your friends and relatives!
Online Petition for DC Statehood and Human Rights:
<http://www.dcstatehoodgreen.org>

We are internationalizing our struggle for our basic human rights! The goal of this global outreach initiative is to present our case at a hearing of the UN Commission on Human Rights, while in the process making our case to the global community and of course the people of our nation. This is the first time the global community as a whole will hear our case. This initiative emphasizing the comprehensive violations of human rights in our community builds on previous testimony and actions on the same theme, namely Sam Jordan's presentation and endorsement of DC self-determination at the meeting of European Greens in 1996, Tim Cooper's petitions to the OAS and recently at Geneva (UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination), focusing on the denial of our political rights (particularly the lack of voting representation in our national legislature), the testimony of Marilyn Preston-Killingham at the UN Sub commission on Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, 8/14/00, on the violations of our political rights and their implications to bad health of our residents, as well as the case made on national violations of economic and social human rights by the Economic Human Rights Campaign (Kensington Welfare Rights Union) at the UN in 1999, and now the OAS. In addition, a petition to the UN Commission on Human Rights focusing on U.S. violations related to environmental racism and injustice has been submitted by a group under the leadership of Dr. Robert Bullard (Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University).

The endorsement of our petition by individuals and organizations around the world will demonstrate the broad international support for a hearing of our grievances at the UN Commission on Human Rights. This is the beginning of a sustained campaign that will of course entail the assemblage of a broad legal team who will document the evidence of our human rights violations in order to push for such a hearing. This Commission is really appropriate because the human rights violations are political, economic and social, not just political as the extremely important previous efforts of Tim Cooper have focused. Thus, this initiative will be complementary to any other action. This will have immense moral and political force. Our government, including Congress will have to feel the heat of world public opinion in a sustained campaign to achieve a meaningful remedy to our present lack of political, social and economic human rights. Of course this petition is also seeking US individual and organizational endorsement, thereby contributing to our campaign of building national support for Statehood. We are convinced that this effort will give us the necessary leverage to achieve a substantial realization of our long denied human rights.

Online Petition for DC Statehood and Human Rights, and more material on this

website: <http://www.dcstatehoodgreen.org>

Notes

(1) See Anthony D. King, 1990, *Urbanism, colonialism, and the world-economy: cultural and spational foundations of the world urban system*, Routledge.

Appendix:

The Reality

While DC's life expectancy has declined, contrary to national trends, income inequality has increased. One half of our children live below the poverty level, as a result of welfare "reform" and impact of inflation since the 1970s. Infant mortality for African Americans remains at twice the national average. While life expectancy has been increasing nationally in the last 15 years, it has declined in the District. Using the most recent statistics available, life expectancy for DC men is 10 years below the national average, for women 5 years. For Black men in DC, the life expectancy is now apparently 58 years or less, for Black women 72. The life expectancy for Black men in the District is lower than for any nation in this hemisphere except for Haiti (Doug Struck and Hamil R. Harris, "Death in the City", *Washington Post* 6/29/98; David Brown and Avram Goldstein, "Death Knocks Sooner for D.C.'s Black Men", *Washington Post* 12/4/97). The District income gap is greater than any state, or virtually all the nation's major cities, and is the underlying cause of the poverty and bad health of so many of our residents (see e.g., James Lardner, "Deadly Disparities", *Washington Post* 8/16/98). DC's ratio of the top fifth to bottom fifth of average income of families with children is 27 to 1, \$203,110 to \$7,498, compared to the national ratio of 10 to 1. DC's ratio just a decade ago was 16. The middle fifth of family income, averaging \$36,918, has not kept up with inflation (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *Economic Policy Institute*). The same trends have been highlighted in "D.C. Gap Between Rich, Poor Widening Census Data Show A City Polarized On Several Scales", by D'Vera Cohn and Sarah Cohen, *Washington Post*, 8/13/01, B01 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A1585-2001Aug12.html>): "The dramatic divisions between the District's haves and have-nots widened over the 1990s, according to new census data that show a growing number of rich and poor even as the middle class is shrinking." Instead of "trickle down" economics, we have witnessed an "artesian well" flow of wealth to the top. This is also demonstrated by IRS statistics for District tax payers, showing the booming incomes of the wealthy, while low/middle income brackets stagnate or decline. Meanwhile Congress and the President denies us an obligated federal payment amounting to at least \$1.8 billion per year as well as the ability to tax the income of non-resident workers.

Catastrophic cuts in the District's "safety net" have occurred in the last few years, forced by the austerity regime of the Control Board with the unfortunate compliance of the City Council and Mayor. "With the city in better financial shape, Williams said he hopes to begin rebuilding the social services network for children, seniors and the poor that was devastated by hefty budget cuts in recent years. 'All of them took a huge cut as we made the policy choices... to get us out of the financial predicament we faced'" (*Washington Post* 2/9/99). We are still waiting for the rebuilding of the safety net promised two years

ago. Programs such as Tenants, General Public and Emergency Assistance, Chore Aid for Seniors and Disabled have not been restored. Homeless Services remains seriously under funded. Over 50,000 residents remain without any health coverage, while the Mayor's health insurance program for those under 200% of poverty remains grossly inadequate and under funded. The destruction of DC General, our only public hospital, is an assault on the human rights of our residents, especially our low income and working class majority. The TANF benefit with entitlements included remains below the federal poverty level. Budgeting for these programs are literally a matter of life and death.

Human Rights Violations in the District of Columbia, Political, Economic and Social

In 1996, the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations issued General Comment 25, which held that the status of the residents of the District to be a flagrant violation of the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**. The U.S., along with 136 nations ratified this Covenant. The lack of full congressional representation of DC residents and continued erosion of home rule are direct violations of the Covenant's Article 25 which guarantees the right of every citizen to participate in national and local government through elected representatives. It holds that every citizen has the right to "take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives", to vote and to be elected by "universal and equal suffrage" and to have access to public service on "general terms of equality". Only statehood will give us self-determination comparable to other U.S. citizens, including permanent legislative and budgetary autonomy as a state, as well as two Senators representing this majority African American and Latino community.

The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, in particular, articles 23, 25 and 26 outline each person's right to housing, food, education, health care and a job at a living wage. For example, Article 25 states: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself [herself] and his [her] family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services..."

The U.S. government, its instrument the Control Board with the acquiescence of DC government now stand in clear contempt of the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** (signed by U.S. on 2/16/95; the U.S. along with Somalia are apparently the only nations in the world which have still not ratified this Convention!) This Convention asserts the following:

"The child has a right to the highest standard of health and medical care attainable. States shall place special emphasis on the provision of primary and preventive health care, public health education and the reduction of infant mortality...Every child has a right to a standard of living adequate for his or her physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.. The child has a right to leisure, play and participation in cultural and artistic activities."

All of these social and economic rights have been systematically violated as a result of DC budget cutting, implementation of the national welfare reform, and the continued denial of political rights of District residents. For example, Congress continues to forbid

the use of local, public and even some private funds for the District's clean needle-exchange program to cut short the HIV/AIDS epidemic which now mainly impacts people of color.

Finally, the continual threat of the reimposition of the death penalty in DC by federal authorities or Congress is contrary to internationally recognized standards of human rights. The violations of these human rights are objectively and profoundly racist since its worst effects are borne by African Americans, Latinos and other people of color, first of all children, but the rights of all DC residents are being violated.

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A paper written to encourage debate!

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