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Race Discrimination Within the Latino Community

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During the recent Operation PUSH convention, it was announced that African American and Latino leaders had signed a 10-point economic, political, and civil rights covenant. Both groups pledge to create a powerful coalition and a common national agenda.  

I support coalition building that works toward justice, economic and political power of African Americans and Latinos. However, it is ironic that some Latino leaders and organizations seeking equal treatment and equal justice have ignored the issue of race within our own community in terms of their treatment of Latinos of African descendants as well as indigenous people. Race discrimination is a skeleton in the closet of the Latino community.

The debate on race relations among Latinos has intensified in the last decade. As a Puerto Rican of African descendants, I am hopeful that the signing of this covenant will crystallize the issue. In fact, the leaders who signed the covenant should make this issue a priority on the coalition’s agenda. The pertinent questions are: Why have Latinos of African descent and indigenous people been excluded from gaining economic and political power? Why have their presence and their contributions been ignored?

Latino leaders and organizations do not want to acknowledge that racism exists among our people, so they have ignored the issue by subscribing to a national origin strategy. This strategy identifies Latinos as a group comprising different nationalities, thereby creating the false impression that Latinos live in a color-blind society.

It is difficult to ignore the African presence in the Americas, since 90% of the estimated 10 million slaves brought during the slave trade were transported to Mexico, Central/South America, and the Caribbean. Yet for centuries the African presence within Latino society has been downplayed. The contributions of Black Latinos to culture, music, religion, history, literature, military and other aspects of our society have been overlooked. Today, many Afro-Latinos face the same dilemma confronted by many in the African American community for decades: not acknowledging the historical and psychological dysfunction created within their own history. I believe that the “dysfunction” is created as a result of racism and giving accreditation to the contributions made by people of African descent. Conditioning also played a role in this dysfunction where many people of African descendants adopted “whiteness” and denounced their dark skin color, i.e. dilemma between light skin and dark skinned Blacks.

In a recent Chicago Tribune commentary titled “Minority Representation on TV” (August 14 1999), members of the newly formed African American and Latino coalition protested the lack of minority participation in the film and television industry in Hollywood. Unfortunately, Latino leaders are not making similar demands on the Spanish-speaking media. It is rare to see Latinos of African descent on Spanish-speaking television or in movies. It is equally rare to see them advertising products in national Latino magazines. For a long time, Spanish-speaking television has portrayed Latinos of African descent and indigenous people as uneducated, lazy, sex driven, violent, sloppy, and untrustworthy.

It is even more troubling to see the Latino creating a perception that all Latinos look like Ricky Martin, Julio Iglesias, and Gloria Estefan. This Eurocentric model is evident whenever you tune to Spanish television programming. The actors, reporters, and talk show hosts are all basically blond and blue-eyed. Consider the recent coverage of the Pan American games by Univision. (Spanish television network). Many of the athletes participating in the games were either Latinos of African descendants or indigenous people. In contrast, the reporters and the anchor people represented the Eurocentric model. This new coalition should question not only the exclusion of Latino of African descendants in front of the camera, but also their presence behind the cameras as producers, directors, technicians, and executives.

Dr. Juan Andrade, Jr., president and founder of the United States Hispanic Leadership Institute and a member of this newly formed coalition, published a pamphlet inviting the general public to attend the institute’s 17th annual conference in Chicago in October. The image on the cover of the pamphlet is supposed to represent Latino/Hispanic unity, but not one of the 24 individuals pictured is a Latino of African descent. Does this exclusion reflect an entrenched attitude, or is it an oversight on the part of our leaders?

Another concern that needs to be addressed is the myth that Latinos of African descent are physically strong, capable of becoming great athletes, musicians and dancers, but lacking intelligence. A case in point occurred in Puerto Rico in April 1998 during hearings regarding abortion and teenage pregnancy in Puerto Rico. A Republican senator in the township of Fajardo indicated that his solution would be to sell white babies to Americans and to keep the Black babies because they are natural athletes who will build Puerto Rico’s Olympic team. Although the media criticized the senator for suggesting that Puerto Rico should develop a baby factory industry, the issue of racism was swept under the rug.
At a time when the Latino population is expected to become this country's largest minority group, Latinos of African descent are not considered an integral part of Latino society. I support the opportunity to coalesce with the African American community. However, the African American community must be aware that a racial problem does exist within the Latino society, and it will not disappear until the Latino leaders and organizations establish a serious and sincere dialogue to examine the treatment of Latinos of African descent.

The status of the Afro-Latino Community will be the focus of a series of events sponsored by the White House/Office of Public Liaison on September 15-17, 1999. The Office of Public Liaison will provide briefings on civil rights, economic development and community empowerment, education, and other issues. On August 19-22, 1999, the Puerto Rican Commission on Civil Rights sponsored a roundtable discussion on discrimination in Puerto Rico. This commission has published a book probing the race issue among Puerto Ricans. The book is entitled "Are We Racists?". The initial discussion should focus on how exclusion and negative stereotyping have affected generation after generation of Black Latinos. It's time to send a wake-up call to many of our leaders.

Carlos Flores is a longtime community activist in the Puerto Rican community, and the former project coordinator for Project Kalinda, at the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College in Chicago.

Footnote:
1. The Operation PUSH Convention is an annual event. This year's convention took place on July 26, 2000 in the Hyatt Regency in the City of Chicago. The key theme of the convention was "Bridging the Gap: Moving from Margin to Mainstream." The convention's program focused on the following related social issues:
   a. The need for law enforcement to play a constructive role in society.
   b. Destructive repercussions of criminal justice policy on disadvantaged communities.
   c. AIDS as a growing crisis in the Black community.

THE COVENANT FOR THE NEXT CENTURY: A TEN POINT PLAN FOR PROGRESS

The story of America is the story of diverse communities in a common struggle for equal access to education, public accommodations, housing, health care and the voting ballot. When united by hope, not divided by fear, can people without political and economic might to enable greater opportunities for all and create a better union.

On the doorstep to a new American century, we unite again to call upon the nation to bring all into the American Dream leaving no one behind. History will watch closely as we decide how to act in this time of peace and prosperity; it will judge us severely if we squander this golden opportunity for progress. Rather than remaining fragmented by fears, let us implement this forward-looking agenda of hope and realize the promise of the American Dream.

"The Mission: The National Rainbow/PUSH Coalition (RPC) is a multiracial, multi-issue, internal membership organization founded by Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, Sr. Their national headquarter is in Chicago, Illinois and they maintain a bureau in Washington, D.C.

For More Information see: www.rainbowpush.org

The following are excerpts from the 10 Point Plan:

1. Close the Gaps: Leave No American Behind
   We must build a bridge between the surplus culture and the deficit culture. The New Markets Initiative recognizes that inclusion leads to growth and its programs must be passed. Congress also ought to enforce and expand the Community Reinvestment Act, a powerful tool to correct the discrimination endemic in capital markets.
   We must secure adequate protection of access to resources and opportunities for women, rural and urban poor and people of color. We must secure fair and equitable implementation of immigration laws and secure the adequate protection of immigration rights.

2. Quality Public Education for All Children
   All schools must be choice and all children chosen. This can only be accomplished with guaranteed quality public education for all children in America.
   There should be equal funding for all public schools, colleges and universities, and all should have access to adequate teaching materials, teacher training, infrastructure and technological equipment. We must continue to support bilingual education with adequate funding to ensure that language minorities are afforded the same level of access to education.

3. Alternatives to the Jail Industrial Complex
   We oppose spending for development of first class prisons while we still have second class schools. We are troubled by the willingness of state governments to invest tax dollars in incarceration over education. We must provide an alternative to the jail industrial complex as the dominant economic strategy for America's poor urban and rural communities.

4. Guaranteed Health Care for All Americans
   We will not rest until access to health care is guaranteed to all Americans, including the working poor. We will pass a bill that guarantees every American access to health care and will make the best health care in our country available to all Americans.

5. An End to the Glamorization of Violence
   America is in desperate need of a comprehensive plan to combat the widespread violence that has become an accepted part of everyday life. This plan will include, but not be limited to, licensing of gun owners and registration of guns. A nationwide effort to de-glamorize violence through popular culture similar to the successful efforts to de-glamorize use of tobacco, and strong support of neighborhood-based initiatives for zero tolerance of violent behavior.

6. Affordable Housing for All Americans
   We sought to ensure that all Americans have access to affordable housing. To accomplish this end, we must reorient national housing subsidies to better address areas of genuine need such as the construction of new, multifamily dwellings and the protection of housing for the very poor. We must also ensure equal access to public housing for all Americans.

7. Restoration of Civil Society
   We can still reverse the decline of popular participation in America's civic life. There is no better way to begin than by reducing the disproportionate influence of money in our federal elections. The controlling influence of wealthy donors undermines the essential principle of democracy-one person, one vote. We support legislation for redistricting to secure adequate representation.

8. Investing the Surplus in our Future
   We have a moral obligation to invest the federal surplus in the American people and keep Social Security and Medicare safe for future generations. We should invest in programs that offer the promise of maintaining and expanding economic growth over the long-term.

9. Conscience and Consistency in International Affairs
   Let us keep the principle of human rights at the center of our nation's conduct in international affairs. We must make clear that the principles of international law, human rights, self-determination, economic justice and consistency shall guide our efforts overseas. We should engage in a full review of all of our commitments under NAFTA and other international trade agreements to ensure that workers abroad are being treated in accordance with their human rights. The price of free trade does not have to be the decimation of the world environment and the exploitation of its people.

10. Preservation of the Environment
    All of those above hopes for a better community are conditioned on the preservation of the environment. We must stop the dumping in poor urban and rural communities. Let us heed the obvious signs of global warming. Let us invest in parks and green-space in urban America.
    Therefore, the Latino Civil Rights Organizations and the African American Civil Rights Organizations join Rainbow PUSH Coalition in executing this covenant on this third day of August in the year of our Lord Nineteen Hundred and Ninety Nine in the City of Chicago in the State of Illinois.