

Interview with Angela Davis

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Introduction

THE FOLLOWING INTERVIEW WITH ANGELA Y. DAVIS WAS UNDERTAKEN BECAUSE THE National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, of which Ms. Davis is a co-chairperson, is the only nationally coordinated program by left organizations to oppose government repression. Given the fragmented, locally oriented and short-range nature of most anti-repression campaigns, we think it is important to support and critically assess any program that attempts to develop long-range strategies. We welcome articles that critically assess the practical experiences and program of the Alliance.

The National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression was organized in May 1973 to develop a popular movement against increasing government repression. According to the Alliance's statement of purpose, the formation of the Alliance is "a rejection of the divisions that have often been used to keep people's movements weak and defenseless. It seeks to bring together people of all ethnic groups: Black, Chicano, Native American, Puerto Rican, Asian, and white. It joins church activists and Communists, men and women, unionists and community organizers, students and prisoners, GIs and civilians. No group in the coalition surrenders its own identity and program, but are all committed to bringing to life the maxim that an injury to one is an injury to all."

Ten forms of repression are the targets of the National Alliance's fight back: (1) attempts to isolate, persecute, and prosecute political activists; (2) attempts to destroy movements for change in the prisons; (3) legislation aimed at repressing our basic rights or that seeks to outlaw organizations that work for social changes; (4) attempts to deny the labor movement the right to organize, the right to strike, and any other forms of repressing labor; (5) police murders and other crimes against the people—especially oppressed people of color; (6) failure to grant general amnesty to those who resisted the war in Indochina; (7) attempts to crush movements for democracy and against racism in the military; (8) governmental moves to restore capital punishment; (9) the growing trend of government agencies to use prisoners and other victims, especially the poor for human experimentation and behavior

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control; (10) and increasing harassment and deportation of the foreign-born, especially those who escaped countries dominated by U.S. imperialism.

The objective of the Alliance is to focus coordinated public attention on repressive situations, get the facts millions of people, and mobilize them to move together in a way that makes the government back off. The Alliance makes use of the written word through regular newsletters and pamphlets, graphic communication through slide shows and films, and the spoken word through tours and conferences. It also moves people into action through mass demonstrations, petition campaigns, and filling the courtrooms. Where appropriate, legal actions such as friend-of-the-court briefs and affirmative action suits are joined with mass action.

The Alliance has singled out for special focus in its campaign the state of North Carolina, where repression of Black and Native American activists has been most intense. (For a detailed analysis of the situation in North Carolina, see "North Carolina: Laboratory for Racism Repression"— available through the Alliance's national office at the address given below.)

The Alliance has used these organizing techniques to build support for the Attica Brothers, Wounded Knee defendants, Carlos Feliciano, George Merritt and Gail Madden of Plainfield, N.J., Martin Sostre framed in New York, Ruchell Magee and the San Quentin Six, Los Tres del Barrio, the Puerto Rican National Party Prisoners, the Wilmington 10, Charlotte 3, Ayden 11, and other victims. For further information regarding the Alliance, write to:

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On The National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression

The idea for the Alliance was born immediately after I was acquitted. Everyone involved in the movement for my freedom understood that the "not guilty" verdict was the result of a tremendous mass movement that involved literally hundreds of thousands of people throughout this country as well as other parts of the world. All of us were acutely aware that the same kind of movement had not yet been used to bring people's aid and assistance to many other political prisoners still behind the walls. So we decided to attempt to build a united front organization that would be able to struggle for the freedom of political prisoners, fight around issues involving prisons, and attack the mounting wave of racist repression as well.

The structure of the Alliance is something that, in terms of long-range struggle, has not really succeeded in the past. We attempted in the first place to bring existing organizations together. We found that in my case the most effective means of organizing the various campaigns—the bail campaign, the fight to improve the prison conditions that I was living under, and eventually the struggle for my freedom—was to reach people through existing structures. That way we were able to reach literally hundreds of thousands of people.

We began with the notion that progressive organizations, though they might have ideological differences, could be brought together on the basis of an understanding that the struggle against repression is one that affects us all. Many diverse political, labor, religion and civic organizations—including the American Indian Movement, the Republic of New Africa, the Communist Party, the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, the National Conference of Black Lawyers and the Women's League for Peace and Freedom—are part of the Alliance. We've all decided that when it comes to freeing political prisoners, fighting against repression, and building a shield between the government and ourselves, we must all unite.

There was a considerable struggle around the name of the Alliance and it ended up being quite unwieldy. We did that very specifically because we felt that it's not right to draw artificial distinctions between somebody who is arrested and subjected to repression because he or she is Black, Chicano, Asian, or Indian and those who are arrested because of their political activity. We decided that there would be a constant dialectic between what we call racist repression and repression directed against people because of their class and activism. So many of the cases that the Alliance is working on involve racist repression. Joanne Little in North Carolina, for example, is perhaps the most well-known case at the moment.

The Alliance is also struggling around cases that involve individuals who are leaders of social movements. In North Carolina, for example, there was a move on the part of the government to crush all the existing movements and they singled out for repression the leaders of the students, antiwar, and GI movements. It's clear that it is necessary to mount a really tremendous campaign around them, not only because they're individuals, but also because the government attempts through them to destroy movements. By defending them we are also defending the right of people in North Carolina to organize.

The Alliance does not attempt to substitute for any existing movement. We see the struggle against repression as extremely important, but only insofar as this struggle defends movements which fight for jobs, movements which fight for revolutionary change, and movements which in general fight against exploitation and racism. One of the main purposes of the Alliance is to provide these movements with a shield against the government so that there is more room and flexibility to go out and organize masses of people. Therefore, we would never say to any person that you should leave your political work and join the fight against repression because the two are very closely linked. We have never said that the Alliance is the vanguard of a revolutionary movement. It is rather an attempt to put a shield between all people's movements and the government.

We see now, through the revelations about Watergate, the FBI, and CIA, that there is an urgent need for a movement against repression. As the economic crisis deepens—unemployment is continuing to rise and people are finding it more and more difficult to survive—it means that if activists are organizing there is going to be a higher level of resistance. People are going to have to get out in the streets

and fight in a mass way, and workers are going to have to go out on strike. If we expect to get through this period without working people having to bear the entire burden of the crisis, there are going to have to be many, many more struggles. This means that the government is going to bring out of the closet the weapons that it has used in the past, as well as develop new methods to attempt to destroy these movements. There's no doubt that the level of repression is going to rise. For example, in Los Angeles all 7,000 members of the Police Department are being trained to put down "food riots." Also, the fact that the FBI has been training SWAT squads is an indication of the degree to which the government is preparing itself to deal with people's movements. And if we don't have an anti-repression and antiracism movement that's strong enough to repel some of that, it's going to make it very difficult indeed for any movement to get off the ground.

Therefore, we see the need for every effort to unify and bring together people and groups that are essentially fighting for the same thing. This doesn't mean that we try to level political differences because we understand that political differences are going to remain. For example, we have both the Republic of New Africa and the Communist Party in the Alliance. As a communist, I see the struggle of Black people as being an important part of the fight to overcome capitalism. The Republic of New Africa, on the other hand, says that in order to achieve the emancipation of Black people there must be a separate nation. We can sit down and talk about why we think the other is incorrect and fight ideologically, but then we understand that when we go into Alliance meetings we must leave those differences behind. The only way you can really build a revolutionary movement is by each organization trying to prove the correctness of its policies through practice and not by imposing a single ideology on everybody.

One of the major specific concerns of the Alliance in the past year and a half has been the exposure of the State of North Carolina and to building of movements against repression in that state. We've come to the conclusion that there's more repression concentrated in that state than anywhere else in the United States. There are a number of reasons why this state is the site of the most intensive repression. It has the highest proportion of unorganized workers. Next to Mississippi, I think, it has the lowest per capita income. Something like 35% to 40% of all Black families living in North Carolina don't even have inside plumbing. At the same time, there has consistently been a very strong resistance movement there. And recently when there was a tremendous Black movement emerging and developing, there was an attempt to completely crush it and, within months, literally scores of charges were brought against Black people, Indians, and some white people also. North Carolina is also a very strategic state. Two of the largest military bases, Fort Bragg and Fort Lejeune, are located there and have been involved in training Chilean soldiers. Within the tobacco, textile, and furniture industries, there has been a consistent policy of powerful repression against workers. Next to Georgia, North Carolina has more prisoners per capita than any other state and it leads the nation

in the number of prisoners on Death Row. Also, the Federal Bureau of Corrections selected North Carolina to be the site of their behavior research center at Butner because they felt that this is where their work would be most easily facilitated with the help of local universities.

We don't take the attitude that people, for example, in California should struggle around North Carolina just because our sisters and brothers there are really in bad shape. We see a direct relationship between a victory over repression in that state and diminishing the ability of every other state to consolidate its repressive apparatus. It is with this in mind that the Alliance is organizing nationally around the Wilmington Ten, the Ayden 11, the Charlotte Three, the Joanne Little case, and other political prisoners in North Carolina. The effort to prevent the behavior modification center from being established at Butner and to make the death penalty unconstitutional in the case of Jesse Fowler definitely has national implications. So we see the struggles in other states as being related in a very concrete sense to the fight in North Carolina.

On the Prison Movement

The struggle behind the walls is extremely important and is mounting. The accumulated experiences of the past few years are beginning to take effect. If you look at the evolution of the cases of George Jackson, Ruchell Magee, the San Quentin Six, the Attica Brothers, the Leavenworth Brothers, Marie Hill, and many others who are either targets of repression or who became targets after they were incarcerated, we can understand the level of resistance that is taking place. The personal history of Marie Hill is interesting in this respect. She epitomizes the development that many prisoners have undergone in the last few years. She was picked up on the streets about six years ago when she was 15 and charged with murdering a white man in a little town in North Carolina. Now, of course, all of her legal rights were violated. She wasn't told that she had a right to see her lawyer, and a confession was literally beaten out of her. At her trial, the confession was the only substantial evidence and consequently she was convicted. Not only was she convicted, but she was also sentenced to death. Some lawyers from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and others got together and built a movement and managed to get the death sentence overturned. But she is now facing a life sentence. When she went to prison she was just a young Black sister who had never been involved in politics. But when these things happened to her, when people began to organize around her, she began to study and think, and she began to grasp something of the nature of racism. She began to have discussions with her sisters in prison and eventually became known as one of the leaders inside the walls of the Women's Prison in North Carolina. As a result of that, she has been the subject of harassment and intimidation. She also has some severe medical problems now as a result of their consistent refusal to attend to her health. When we study the lives and political

careers of George Jackson, Ruchell Magee, the San Quentin Six, and others, we see essentially the same dynamic at work.

It is unfortunate that there has been a kind of lull in support movements on the outside for prisoners. The struggle inside is continuing and it's probably more intense now than it was in 1970 and 1971, when the prison movement was at its height. The Attica situation is especially important, and the recent conviction of the two brothers, John Hill and Charles Pernasilice, was a real setback. I think that we are going to have to escalate our efforts to support them because their conviction was in a sense a renunciation of our right to organize.

I think that it's also extremely important to raise, separately and in conjunction with issues involving repression, the various ways in which women as women are special targets of persecution through the prison system and the whole criminal justice system. Unfortunately, the prison movement has been almost exclusively directed toward male prisoners. You hear people talking about "brothers in prison" and forgetting about the fact that there are sisters in prisons all over the country. Many people have the incorrect notion of women's prisons as essentially non-repressive and non-punitive. That notion, of course, is based on the notion that when a woman commits a crime, she is not so much going against the laws of society as she is transgressing against her status as a woman. Therefore, prisons are designed to re indoctrinate women through the cottage system, a "domestic" atmosphere, and teaching prisoners how to sew and cook. Traditionally, this is the attitude toward women in prison that has prevailed ever since the first women prison was built in this country.

You don't hear about the level of brutality that exists in every women's prison. The California Institute for Women may look like a college campus or it may look beautiful, but when you find out what is going on inside the walls, it's a completely different story. I think that recently there has been a marked increase in the level of consciousness of women and there have been struggles going on inside women's prisons from CIW to the Women's House of Detention in New York and the Women's Prison in Raleigh, North Carolina. These struggles have not been publicized at all, even during the high point of media coverage of prison activities. For example, when the Tombs rebellion took place in New York, there was a similar kind of revolt in the Women's House of Detention, yet nobody read about it. There should be special attention paid to women in prison. The special forms of repression suffered by women in prison have to be understood and combated.

We are trying to build a subcommittee of the Alliance that deals specifically with women in prisons. In organizing around such cases as Marie Hill, Joanne Little, Ann Shepard, Lolita LeBron, and others, we are trying to reach out to women's organizations, to get women's organizations directly involved in the fight against repression. Women who truly believe in the fight for the emancipation of women must see the relationship between their struggles and those women who are the most repressed.

On the Prospects for Organizing Within the University

I think that the prospects now are very good. There is a lot of talk now in the media about the apathy that is supposed to prevail on the campuses. While the level of struggle in general is much lower than it was a few years ago, I think that students now have an even deeper understanding of what's happening to this country. One problem which characterized the student movement of them late 1960s was the incorrect notion that students could in and of themselves, apart from relating to working and community people, build and lead a revolutionary movement. The most extreme example of this was the idea that students were going to be the vanguard of the revolution because workers were no longer revolutionary. I think that was wrong. But when student activists also began to understand the incorrectness of that notion, unfortunately many of them left the campuses in order to organize in communities and workplaces. And this left students without leadership.

I think it's important to understand that when we talk about undergraduates, there is a constant turnover and they are only around the campus for three or four years. For example, there are few students now in 1975 who can remember what happened around the Cambodian protests and they are unable to learn from the experiences and sense of struggle that emerged then. The basic problem on college campuses is the lack of structure and direction. It is not a lack of concern or militancy. And I can talk about this from my own personal experience because I do a great deal of speaking on campuses. I have spoken at literally scores of campuses over the last two years and I've discovered that students turn out in incredibly large numbers throughout the country. Young people always want to know what they can do to help the struggle, how they can contribute to the movement against racism and repression. When we explain the existing economic crisis and the reasons why the crisis is irreversible, when we discuss what's happening on the world scene, the increasing isolation of the U.S. government, and the increasing resistance by peoples of color against imperialism, and when we talk about the fact that socialism is the only real answer to existing problems, we find that students are really impressed and receptive. I'm not saying that we're going to have a widespread revolutionary student movement tomorrow, but I think that what has happened over the last couple of years has paved the way for this kind of receptivity. If student leaders and organizations can link the struggles of students with the fight against racism, unemployment, and other manifestations of the present crisis, then there is a possibility for an even greater and more sustained student movement than we have seen in the past.

On Academic Repression

Using repression in its broadest sense, I think that the universities are a very important instrument of repression for maintaining the existing capitalist society. They're designed to develop individuals who will be committed to perpetuating monopoly capitalism. Also, universities have always served as a recruiting ground

for the repressive agencies, such as the FBI and CIA. It's also important to point out the ways in which the universities serve as instruments of racism. William Shockley, for example, is allowed to flit around the country and talk about genetics even though he isn't a geneticist. Under the guise of academic freedom, he is encouraged to advocate racist and even fascist solutions. Nobody would be allowed to do that in a socialist country because those countries understand the relationship between form and content. They understand that the democratic right to free speech does not include the right to deny others the right to exist.

One of the very important issues confronting the campuses today is the fact that many of the democratic gains and victories that were achieved by Black students during the 1960s and early 1970s are being constantly withdrawn. According to a recent report, there has been an approximate 11% decrease in the number of Black freshmen in 1973. And if you include all students of color and white students from working-class backgrounds, there has been something like a 16% decrease. The racism of the campuses reflects racism in the society and goes hand in hand with what's been happening at Boston.

Another real problem is that many of the student leaders who remain on the campuses were co-opted by the administration. That is what happened at Lumumba-Zapata College (at the University of California in San Diego). The number of Black and Chicano students is steadily declining there and it's losing all vestiges of its original character. If you don't understand the relationship between what's happening on and off the campus, it's much easier to be co-opted. So while I think it's important to fight against repression on the campus, I think it is equally important to organize and inspire students to relate their own interests to what is happening to working people in the society at large.

Students tend to unconsciously imbibe false ideas about their position in society. When you get down and really talk about who wields power in this country, it's not the students or their families, even though a lot of students come from middle-class backgrounds. Their families aren't the Hughes and DuPonts and Rockefellers; students don't control the economic and political power in this country. And so it is important to educate students that they have a direct interest in linking up with what's happening to workers. Now a college graduate has just as much or even more difficulty finding a job as a worker and they're going to be thrown into the workforce just like any other worker. A lot of students are beginning to understand this and I think we should concentrate our organizing on those campuses where students would be naturally most receptive. I am presently looking for a job in a community college because students there are both students and workers and they're forced to relate what they learn in the classroom to what happens to them in the community. It's really important to break through the elitism on the campuses. This doesn't only affect white students. They try to do the same thing to Black students straight from the ghetto who don't have any material reasons to think that they're better than their brothers and sisters who are working on the assembly line. The

universities cultivate elitism and we have to organize students to recognize that this does not serve their true, long-range interests.

On Criminal Justice System Workers

Most people who take jobs in the criminal justice system do so for economic reasons. There are probably a few who have very strong authoritarian and sadistic tendencies, but the vast majority is people who need a job. The problem is that in order to fulfill their responsibilities as guards or police, the criminal justice system requires them in one way or another to be repressive and authoritarian. There are probably a few who retain some degree of humanity, but this ultimately comes from their relationships outside their work. There are some exceptions like Officers for Justice in San Francisco and the Afro-American Patrolmen's League in Chicago. These are both Black groups that organized as a result of the fact that they felt all kinds of racism directed against them within the police departments. This kind of organizing should be encouraged and we should try to support their efforts.

If you're a prisoner, it makes a difference if you have to spend every single moment of the day fighting with racist, sadistic guards. If there is a relaxation of repression on that level, then it becomes a little easier to endure the incarceration and maybe you can become more productive. I say this from my own experience because when I was in the Marin County jail, practically all the matrons there were constantly screaming—I even had to fight to get my food. When I was transferred to the jail in Palo Alto, I began to realize how tense I had been in Marin. And it was only in Palo Alto, where the guards were a little less brutal, that I began to loosen and to start writing again. So I think it's important to try to reach the guards on that level so that the brothers and sisters inside can have a little more flexibility and room to develop themselves. But we should not labor under the illusion that the nature of the institution will be fundamentally changed. So we can't see that as the central issue in our organizing.

On Socialism and Capitalism

I think it is very important to give people in this country a sense of what it means to be part of a struggle for socialism on the basis of the concrete history of institutions and traditions in this country. Certainly, to fight for socialism means that we join an international community of struggle which includes all the socialist countries. But we can't look to the Soviet Union or China or Cuba to tell us specifically and in detail what a socialist United States of America will be like. For one thing, none of the socialist countries, when their revolutions triumphed, were nearly as industrialized as the United States. But I'm not suggesting that we cannot learn from socialism in other countries. For example, I've found that students can relate to the fact that in socialist countries you don't have to worry about paying for tuition in universities. You don't have to pay for books or medical care. There's

no inflation. These are the kind of basic things that people in this country have to learn about socialism. If you compare the present circumstances of capitalism and socialism, it is very clear that socialism is vibrant, developing and continuing to grow, whereas the situation in capitalist countries is very bleak indeed.