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Larry Moskowitz (l) marching in the NYC Labor Day Parade with Grand Marshal Edgar Romney.

From Washington, DC, to Charlottesville, Virginia, acts of racism reflected in words, deeds, and legislation are rising across our country. Yet, the good news is that anti-racist opposition is growing, particularly being mounted by many Jewish organizations.

This is an extremely positive development and very much in keeping with our history. As just one of many possible examples, during the Civil Rights movement period, while Jews represented two percent of our country's population, it was estimated that we represented half to two thirds of the white involvement in the movement.

With heightened episodes of racism has come increased discussion of the nature of racism, how best to understand and recognize it, and how to adopt best practices moving forward.

It is an old cliché, yet still true, that babies are not born racist. Rather, they are socialized over time to develop racist beliefs and attitudes, an unfortunate reality illustrating that racism is systemic in our society.

The question then becomes: why does it exist? To achieve an answer, the logical question becomes: who stands to benefit from systemic racism?

A broad overview of our history as a nation sheds light on the answer: follow the money. Native Americans were oppressed so that their land and resources could be stolen. African slaves were brought here to primarily provide unpaid labor for the plantation economy of the South. And immigrants, whether from Europe, China, or other parts of the world, fleeing oppression in their countries, provided cheap labor to build our railroads, and backbone the development of basic industries from steel to garment and myriad others.

Racism as a system is a key, if not the key, to enable the maximizing of profits for the elites (“the 1%”) within U.S. capitalism, by oppressing people of color and keeping all working people divided to make organizing in resistance as difficult as possible.

But to justify this, an ideology of racism needed to be developed to hide its basic purpose and build as broad support as possible outside of the elites, including from those who were, to one degree or another, victims of racism. So a classic “putting lipstick on a pig” operation was developed. The key components of the ideology were: convincing, particularly, white working class and middle-class people, that they were morally, intellectually, and culturally—basically in all ways—superior; that they benefited from the system; and, that if they had problems, the main source of those problems were “the other”.

White skin privilege, which definitely exists, needs to be understood within this context. The main beneficiaries of racism are the 1%. There is no question that in relation to people of color sections of white working class and middle-class people benefit. That’s the privilege.

But while people of color are oppressed and on the front lines of victimization, white workers and middle-class people lose far, far more than they gain as a result of racism.

To use one example, the wages of white workers in the South are the lowest of any section of the country when compared to white workers across the United States. This is primarily due to the minuscule number of workers organized into unions. And the primary reason for that is the divide among workers due to race that made/makes organizing in the South that much more difficult than anywhere else.

This is not an attempt to argue for an exclusively economic populist approach, although I believe economic justice issues are at the core of building a majority anti-racist, democratic movement. Issues of racism, both public issues as well as how we function internally, need to be explicitly addressed. To not do that is a road to failure.

The classic example is the attempt by the AFL-CIO to organize in the South after World War II called “Operation Dixie”. This was a total failure, largely due to a strategy of trying to organize without addressing the issue of race.

The question then becomes what the appropriate context is to most effectively both address and defeat racism. The best way to attempt to answer this question is in real-life specifics and not in general propositions.

For Jewish progressive activists, all of the positive work that is achieved boils down to one overarching task: broadening resistance to the bigoted 1% and White



Moskowitz being arrested at Fight for \$15 rally.

House-driven agenda, from within the Jewish community to unite with all other possible sectors to create a majority movement of opposition against income inequality, racism and pro-democracy. Any meeting or conference that doesn't achieve this as a framework misses the mark on the necessary priorities of today.

This is not to say that there aren't myriad ways to have this conversation from the point of view of content and structure. Elements should consider: what are the concrete policies we must advocate and those we must oppose, who are the forces to unite with from the outset, who do we want to win over, and what is the opposition, strategy, and actions? In other words, what is the plan?

An absolutely necessary part of any plan is giving attention to the internal dynamics and interpersonal and working relationships of organizational members and coalition partners who work together. No matter how committed one is to social justice, how much work one has to be done, there can be no passes for inappropriate actions, behavior, or language.

This is particularly true since racist ideas and practice affects us all given how deeply ingrained they are in our system, which is ironic and unfortunate within the Jewish community since racism and anti-Semitism have the same source, and it is impossible to effectively fight anti-Semitism without fighting racism.

These discussions alone are not simply acceptable, but vital. Yet, there is a tendency in our movement to have these discussions outside of the context of struggle and understanding the systemic nature of racism.

The issue here is not simply that different individuals and organizations might have different

approaches. But rather that the discussion of racism, outside of the appropriate systemic context, is harmful to combatting racism and therefore sets us back. Elevating personal aspects of racism, acknowledging out individual tendencies and biases, will not eradicate the societal problem.

This approach shifts focus away from the main questions in dealing with racism and gives the impression that if we resolve our own weaknesses, and by doing so, if we say and/or act a form of penance for our individual racist tendencies, we will have addressed the issue meaningfully. And the outcome is the reverse. This route equalizes guilt and privilege with class and power. There is a huge difference between people with racist thoughts and actions and those who maintain the system. None are acceptable, but to make any impact, we must collectively fight the systemic problem which is the underpinning of the entire issue.

Throughout our history, the promoting of racism leads to concrete societal acts like the murders of Black youth, anti-immigrant activities, economic oppression, continuous and varied violations of voting rights, and so much more.

The “bottom line” here is that race is used to maintain the power of the 1% so that all working people lose out significantly, no matter how relatively privileged they might be in relationship to various sectors.

If there was ever an issue where “never assume” was a high priority, it’s the discussion of race. It doesn’t matter how often an organization and its individuals deal with issues of race year-round and daily. Any specific discussion must be in the societal context in order for the actual conversation to be positive and fruitful. Anything otherwise would set us back instead of moving us forward.