What’s Wrong with the Social Justice Movement?

Interview with the Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr. by Andrew Stelzer

Andrew Stelzer: I think a lot of people would say that since the 1960s, or perhaps the early 1970s, we haven’t really seen a massive effective mobilization that worked on any issue. Do you think that’s true?

Lawson: Yes. The peace movement has failed. I would say that mobilizations at the Democratic or Republican conventions (in which I have participated) in Seattle, and some of the anti-Iraq War mobilizations have failed. What is needed is a protracted struggle—organizing around non-violent assessment and focusing on a target—with maybe a decade or two of intense activity that does not depend upon Congressional legislation, but rather forces upon a city or nation the agenda of justice and truth.

Stelzer: Sounds like one suggestion is to force local governments rather than the national government to respond. What other tactics are missing?

Lawson: I think all action has to be local action. Local action can become national action if it strikes the ethos of the American people in such a fashion that it will be imitated in many other centers of movement.

Stelzer: You don’t think there is a modern day equivalent of the Civil Rights Movement?

Lawson: Not at all. There’s no modern day equivalent.

Stelzer: What do you say to those who claim that the Immigrant Rights Movement or the Gay Rights Movement are the equivalents?

Lawson: The Gay Rights Movement is mostly about getting laws passed. It is not a movement where tens of thousands of people in the street are demanding change [through] an agenda that they put in the nation’s mind. They’re doing much more lobbying behind the scenes, trying to stop some elec-
tions, which they have not done successfully. It’s not a non-violent movement and it’s not been that effective, in my judgment.

Stelzer: Do you think these movements are not effective because they aren’t trying? Or they just haven’t found the right strategy—or are refusing to see it?

Lawson: I don’t think they have the right strategy. In the first instance, they’re not working from a non-violent perspective and methodology. Secondly, they’re not taking the time to assess what they need to be doing or what needs to be corrected [before] settling on a single issue and working on it. Thirdly, they’re not mobilizing in terms of a mass direct action that dramatizes the issue and helps to change the public mind.

I think there is far more action today than we had in 1953 or 1955 or 1959. But more action over a greater numbers of issues has failed. One, because of the lack of serious study and commitment, including a serious study of the freedom movement of the Southeast and it’s non-violence and Gandhian methodology. Second, because even some of the activist-leaders have not been persuaded that there is a connection between, for example, racism and sexism.

Racism, sexism, violence, and plantation capitalism are interrelated to each other. That’s the principle of convergence. In the movement, Dr. King suggested this. There was a gradual awareness that you had issues of racism; issues of structural poverty, which is what slavery was; and the issue of militarization of the nation. He sensed that all three of these had to be dismantled in order for a new democratic society of justice and truth to emerge.

All through American history, there has been an inability on the part of all sorts of reformers to see the connection between the reforms they want—say, labor unions and racism, or sexism and the violence of society. They’ve not been able to see the interlocking—to see them as parallel systems of denial and oppression for some people. Therefore, they cannot [be] resolved separately. Any effective work against racism is going to also dismantle sexism. And effective work [against both] will dismantle the structural as well as the spiritual forms of violence.

Stelzer: The poor people’s campaign that Dr. King was working on when he was killed, is that an example of convergence? Had that convergence happened already, or was it beginning to happen at that point?

Lawson: He was very clearly trying to get the Peace Movement to see that the issue of poverty and economic deprivation is connected to the issue of justice, which is connected to the issue of peace. This emerging convergence that he recognized, that many of us recognized in the movement, was [in] the beginning stages. Although, I have to say that I made some of those connections as early as 1958 in my workshops for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and other groups around the Southeast.

Stelzer: What is plantation capitalism?

Lawson: Capitalism in the United States began essentially with the taking of the land from the Indians and was compounded by 250 years of plantation slavery [which treated] the worker as a commodity and not as a human being. It solidified racism and made it a system. Plantation capitalism, therefore, is the repetition of those [ideas] in terms of business, workers, profits, and the use of capital.

Over the last 20 years, more than 50 percent of the new jobs that Republicans and Democrats have bragged about have been poverty jobs. We applaud, among other things, a surplus labor force because it keeps wages down. Now workers cannot sustain themselves or their families, therefore [they cannot] be that influential in their neighborhoods about their own environment, [just like in] the 250 years of slavery.

The Wall Street Journal insists that a major goal for the economy is to help people become billionaires and millionaires. In order to gather that wealth quickly or even over a 10-year period, you must fight to see that the workers are not sharing in the benefits of their labor. That is plantation capitalism.

When you allow wealth to accumulate in such a way that you drive out family-owned businesses and farms and produce these huge corporations that in many ways are unmanageable but dictate the notion that the major purpose for our cooperation is
turning a profit, you have plantation capitalism.

Now, I differ tremendously [with that idea]. I think, for example, my medical dollar should provide a good living for all the people connected with the practice of medicine—the doctors, the nurses, the paramedical people, the lab techs, even the janitors who scrub the floors. But I do not believe that my health dollar should be used to make millionaires [of] a family that uses venture capital to buy up hospitals.

I don’t mind folks who become very affluent in various ways in our economy, but I do mind where that’s [done] at the expense of the folk who do the labor. Our society is in trouble because we have a whole lot of work that we need to do: on the infrastructure, on the clean up of the environment, the turning of empty lots into gardens, the turning of empty buildings into useful enterprises (including housing for the community). But I think that the bosses of our society are deliberately excluding that kind of work from being done because they are bound to the notion that work essential for society’s well being ought to be under the rubric of profit for entrepreneurs.

Stelzer: One of the things Dr. King had been talking about was sit-ins around hospitals until everyone got care. If he hadn’t been assassinated, do you think some of these battles we are fighting today could have been won 30 or 40 years ago?

Lawson: The politics of assassination in the 1960s changed our country forever. I have no doubt that the King assassination was agreed to and planned by major agencies of local and federal government, including probably, military intelligence. I suspect that the other assassinations [also] have some of the same footprints, but I’ve not studied them like I’ve studied and investigated the King assassination. When a society produces young men like John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King—who I do not say were perfect products of humanity but were people emerging in their humanity, their vision, [and] their ability to work with society for creative life—when a nation allows such people to be killed off, you do more damage to your nation than you can even imagine. Those assassinations meant that the movement of which King had become a symbol—direct action on the part of the people, people withdrawing their consent from racism and violence, and people organ-
izing themselves to put a justice or a freedom agenda in the White House, in congress, or in the governor’s mansion—that movement got shortchanged and did not have the opportunity to develop into maturity and into the next generation.

It’s very clear that all five of these men were learning a great deal about themselves and about their nation. Malcolm X is the most dramatic example of that. The two Kennedys had no idea about the mean-ness in our society—the poverty that was structur-al—before they emerged nationally. King, Evers, and Malcolm X had learned a great deal about how to move for change. This meant that on the one side you had folks who were appointed or elected to office, and on the other, folks who were coming out of grassroots mass mobilization and action. A perfect combination for serious change in a nation. [But] all of that was destroyed or prohibited and the good work that had been done to create those five men was aborted. Now it has to be done over again because obviously, we have a leadership crisis.

**Stelzer: Are there any movements now in 2010 that inspire you or give you hope?**

**Lawson:** The movement for the 21st century has not yet taken shape. There may be creative activity and creative groups coming together at the local level that will, one day, be the foundation of the 21st century non-violent movement for the United States. But it is not now in place.

**Stelzer:** You are a proponent of non-violence. But here in Mexico, you’ve heard some say that their heroes are guerilla armies, or folks who participated in armed revolu-tions that led to the liberation of their people. Even in the United States, there are stories of armed slave rebel-lions where people achieved some semblance of freedom. How do you respond to people who point to examples like that?

**Lawson:** My great grandfather was a slave. Anyone who pretends that there were successful slave revolts is quite mistaken. There were lots of them, no doubt. But the two best known examples—Denmark Vesey’s rebellion in South Carolina in 1822 and Nat Turner’s rebellion in Virginia in 1831—did not succeed. And the leadership and many innocent people in Virginia and South Carolina were wiped out.

Meanwhile, the underground railroad was far more successful in getting people out from under slavery. That’s how my own great grandfather got out. Also, the revolt of people like Frederick Douglass who as a boy, against the law, learned how to read; or of Owen Brown, who became an accountant on his plantation in South Carolina; or the people who, in contradic-
tion to the wishes of the master, honed their skills so that they could leave or acquired skills that would benefit them in the long run—that was a far greater revolt. It did more to free slaves than any of the violent revolts. Then there are the slaves who said, “I’m not going to let this master convince me I’m less than a human being!” That was another form of revolt. I think there is today a revision of the black experience that could be insidious. I think it’s quite wrong.

To my knowledge, there’s only one [example of] guerilla warfare in Latin America that produced serious change, and that was Fidel Castro. I mean, look at Colombia. The units have been fighting for 50 years, and it’s the people who suffer—from the oligarchy and American militarism as well as from the so-called guerilla units.

After the revolution Castro fundamentally changed his perspective to a non-violent one. He said, “I’m going to eradicate racism and segregation and infant mortality and illiteracy. We’re going to help people go to work in the fields, whereby they can make a living.” The only handicap [for] Castro has been the antagonism and the overt acts of invasion and assault by the United States government. Cuba would be a model for the whole world were it not for the U.S.

**Stelzer:** What does that say? That violent revolution is okay if you have a really good leader who sticks to his values?

**Lawson:** No, I don’t think so. It says that even if you have a military revolution that overthrows a tyrant, to be effective, you must turn to developing a nation that is whole—by dismantling injustices, educating people. What has too often happened with guerilla warfare is that it becomes an obsession, a pathology that no longer has any merit for healing the human condition. That’s the danger of certain kinds of action. It can become so addictive that humans lose control of themselves and are diseased.

**Stelzer:** You seem to be saying “violence is never okay,” but “in this one case it turned out okay.”

**Lawson:** No, I’m saying something more than that. Folks who have these notions about the efficacy of violence can only point to Castro. But one could say that maybe Castro’s violence is what triggered America’s violence. I’m not justifying American violence. I am saying that people who want a better world had better look at the role of violence—behavioral, organized, and systemic—and recognize that in the last 100 years, maybe with the exception of World War II, violence has been the leading enemy of justice and peace in the world. It not only devastates in all sorts of ways, it has also deprived civilian human enterprises of the resources needed to solve problems.
Race, Poverty & the Environment

the national journal for social and environmental justice

Editor Emeritus
Carl Anthony

Publisher
Juliet Ellis

Editor & Art Director
B. Jesse Clarke

Assistant Editor
Merula Furtado

Layout & Design Assistant
Christine Joy Ferrer

Urban Habitat Board of Directors
Joe Brooks (Chair)
PolicyLink
Romel Pascual (Vice-Chair)
Mayor’s Office, City of Los Angeles
Tamar Dorfman (Treasurer)
Policy Link
Carl Anthony
Cofounders, Urban Habitat
Malo Andre Hutson
Department of City and Regional Planning
University of California, Berkeley
Felicia Marcus
Natural Resources Defense Council
Arnold Perkins
Alameda Public Health Department (retired)
Debra Johnson
San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency
Wade Crowfoot
Environmental Defense Fund
Organizations are listed for identification purposes only.

Subscribe to RP&E
Annual subscriptions are $20 for groups and individuals; $40 for institutions. (Free for grassroots groups upon request.) Subscribe online at www.urbanhabitat.org or send subscription checks to: RP&E, 436 14th Street, #1205, Oakland, CA 94612.

©2010 by the individual creators and Urban Habitat. For specific reprint information, queries, or submissions, please email editor@urbanhabitat.org.

ISSN# 1532-2874

Race, Poverty & the Environment was first published in 1990 by Urban Habitat Program and the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation’s Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment. In the interest of dialogue, RP&E publishes diverse views. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the editors, Urban Habitat, or its funders.

Moving the Movement
Environmental & Climate Justice
Transportation Justice

Photos: (Left) USSF march in Detroit, Michigan. ©2010 Labor/Community Strategy Center.
(Upper center) Member of the 44th Street organoponico. ©2008 Scott Braley
(Lower center) LGBT Youth Rally in New York City. ©2010 Ocean Morisset
(Upper right) Transportation Justice Demonstration. ©2010 Urban Habitat
(Lower right) Cover of Floodlines. ©2010 Abdul Aziz

Printed on processed chlorine-free paper 50% post-consumer fiber, 100% recycled

Racial & Gender Justice
Regionalism

Vol. 17 No. 2 | Fall 2010