

**BY MAX RAMEAU, M ADAMS AND ROB ROBINSON**  
**FORMERLY WITH TAKE BACK THE LAND**

# Forward From **FERGUSON**

**PHOTO BY ABDUL AZIZ**

# FORWARD FROM FERGUSON

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by

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## **INTRO**

### **Moving Forward from Ferguson**

In the spring of 1992, Los Angeles burned for six days in what became the largest urban rebellion in the history of the United States, a country with a long and storied history of urban rebellions.

Even though it served as the spark, the LA Rebellion was not caused by the video taped police brutality leveled against motorist Rodney King or even the subsequent “not guilty” verdict for the four white cops responsible. Like the Ferguson, MO rebellion nearly a quarter of a century later, and the countless before and in between, the LA Rebellion was a direct response to systematic oppression and discrimination.

Few behaviors are more fundamentally human than resisting and rising up against oppression. Even when unorganized or lacking a clear set of articulated demands, uprisings happen because human beings instinctively resist oppression and pursue liberation. This is social science 101.

The math at work is just as basic: if oppression + discrimination + poverty = urban rebellion, then the only way to end the string of rebellions is subtracting oppression, discrimination and poverty. Therefore, efforts to end rebellion with community meetings, press conferences or unleashing a brutal military response to crush dissent are doomed to fail.

In the wake of the 1992 Rebellion, the national discourse focused on oppression in black urban life, including racism, poverty and the police as an occupying force (gender is also a major component, but did not make it to the mainstream of that discourse). As a result of the rebellion in Ferguson, MO, sparked by the police murder of Mike Brown, the national discourse is again focused on oppression in black urban life. What to do with this movement moment?

### **From Uprising to Organizing**

For better or for worse, the urban rebellion phase in Ferguson is ending. During rebellions, social justice organizations find themselves in crisis mode, managing the seemingly endless series of emergencies, often to the neglect of strategic concerns. And as conditions on the ground shift, organizations must transition from crisis to organizing mode. This transition is particularly important today as instances of police violence, including murder, appear to be rising, but the demands made and campaigns waged in response to the police violence are woefully inadequate.

The criminalization of entire populations, an angry white backlash, an undefined and unending 'war on terror' and one economic crisis after the next is fueling a growing police apparatus that must justify its existence to stave off the types of cuts that are decimating other parts of local budgets. Add to that the re-segregation and declining quality of schools, health disparities, general disenfranchisement and economic despair, and all the ingredients for a massive social explosion are present, just waiting for a spark.

The dilemma is obvious: if police abuse grows but movement demands, strategies and tactics- which

have proven marginal at best- remain static, we have no hope of winning the future.

While there are many reasons, peculiar and historic, so little progress has been made in the fight against police terrorism in low-income black communities, one of the factors over which the social justice movement exercises some level of control is the manner in which we frame these critical issues, the objectives we set, the demands we make, and the manner in which we plan, direct and execute our campaigns. In many of these respects we, as a movement, have not done well.

In this context, the challenge of radical and progressive organizations is not only to make bolder and more ambitious external demands, but to conceptualize new and effective anti-police abuse campaigns that accomplish at least three internal objectives:

- enhance the power of local communities;
- contribute to building a national movement, with international support, that is strong on the central issue of police abuses; and
- develop an intersectional analysis, centered on class, race, gender and sexuality, that actively encourages the interconnectivity of campaigns with related issues.

In pursuit of these objectives, and in addition to sharper campaign strategies and tactics to achieve the objectives and demands, the social justice movement must envision and develop better campaigns with at least two revamped components:

- a **campaign framework**, around which to build messaging and serve as a nexus for interconnectivity and intersectionality; and
- tiered **campaign demands** that allow for maximum local flexibility and control, support the ambitions and infrastructure of a national campaign and pushes to build a robust social movement;

The clearest way forward is for the black community in particular, and the social justice movement in general, to employ the Human Rights Framework, as opposed to civil rights or equal protection, to the issue of police abuse. And because “criminal justice” system has proven either unwilling or unable to address the killing of unarmed low-income black people by the police, our demands must reach beyond the confines of US law and pursue, instead, a United Nations investigation into individual police killings, as well as the overall oppression of and discrimination against the black community, as violations of our human rights.

## CAMPAIGN FRAMEWORK

*“We need to expand the civil-rights struggle to a higher level -- to the level of human rights. Whenever you are in a civil-rights struggle, whether you know it or not, you are confining yourself to the jurisdiction of Uncle Sam... All of our African brothers and our Asian brothers and our Latin-American brothers cannot open their mouths and interfere in the domestic affairs of the United States.*

*Civil rights keeps you under his restrictions, under his jurisdiction. Civil rights keeps you in his pocket. Civil rights means you're asking Uncle Sam to treat you right. Human rights are something you were born with. Human rights are your God-given rights... ”*

*- Malcolm X  
The Ballot or the Bullet, March 1964*

The first step to building bolder and better campaigns is re-imagining the way we think and talk about the underlying issues associated with that campaign. Good campaign framing makes it easier to connect one issue to another and can clearly illuminate the need for transformative demands, rather than settling for transactional crumbs in exchange for ending a protest.

Because demands flow from the way campaigns talk about the issues at stake, poorly conceived or narrowly constructed campaign frames often lead to inadequate, or even backwards, demands.

For example, a significant number of the recent anti-foreclosure campaigns were framed around two main issues: the legal rights of homeowners and bank malfeasance. The primary demand naturally flowing from these frames was mortgage principle reduction, which resulted in the homeowner keeping the house and the banks paying a “penalty” for their malfeasance in the form of debt reduction. There were also policy demands around bank regulation to prevent future misconduct.

These demands helped the individual homeowner and, if successful, could have curbed illegal behavior by banks. However, the demands did little to address the larger housing problem by, for instance, increasing the affordable housing stock. In addition, because the framing centered firmly around homeowner rights, the demands had no applicability to the majority of blacks and Latin@s, neither of whom has ever experienced homeownership rates exceeding 50% of their population.

Consequently, even if the anti-foreclosure campaigns were wildly successful and every demand was met, they would not have solved the housing/foreclosure crisis, but only addressed the symptom of the crisis and only for homeowners. The poorly constructed campaign frames prevented the social justice movement from advancing transformative demands during a time of extreme crisis.

In order to build a powerful movement and impactful campaigns, campaign frames must do two things: First, speak to the root cause of a social problem, not simply the manifestation of that problem; and,

second, facilitate the process of connecting the campaign's core issues with other issues, so as to build a bigger, strong movement.

Confronting a similar dilemma during the Civil Rights Movement, Malcolm X proposed a different framing: our struggle must not be limited to the confines of civil or domestic rights, but instead expanded to the level of human rights.

The crisis of police shootings and abuses under stop and frisk programs is not a problem of police brutality. Because they are not shooting unarmed wealthy whites- or even armed whites involved in mass shootings- it is clear the police know how to properly interact with people. This is a Human Rights crisis, where a segment of the population is not regarded as deserving of human protections or dignity by the police, prosecutors, courts, media or politicians.

We cannot end police brutality by launching police brutality campaigns. Police brutality can only be stopped by launching human rights campaigns, extending those protections to every human being in this society and the planet.

### **Human Rights as a Nexus for Intersectionality**

Material conditions for the oppressed cannot substantially improve by addressing, or even solving, one single issue. As such, if we were to end police brutality today, low income communities of color would continue to face other forms of oppression. Oppression intersects many groups and over many issues. Conversely, the liberation of oppressed people requires interconnecting solutions.

Intersectionality recognizes the way in which different systems of oppression and discrimination are holistically connected to one another. That is to say, one cannot understand the condition of low income queer black women by looking at class or sexuality or race or gender. That plight can only be understood by examining class *and* sexuality *and* race *and* gender. Consequently, a massive campaign to fundamentally transform the class- or sexuality or race or gender- structure of this society will not end the oppression of that group and persons.

Rather than existing as four separate spheres, each phenomenon is an integral part of the human experience. So, even as organizations are built primarily around one sphere or the other, intersectionality enables us to understand the holistic nature of oppression, rather than hyper-focus on a single oppressive expression.

For example, in the book *Black Power*, by Stokely Carmichael and V. Charles Hamilton, argued blacks in the US faced two primary problems: being black and being poor. Ending black oppression required fixing both of those problems, not just one of them.

In the 1950s and 60s, upscale restaurants in the South were lily white because Jim Crow segregation laws made it illegal for blacks to dine at those establishments. After years of blood shed and lives lost, the civil rights movement effectively ended legal segregation in the US. And yet, on this very day,

upscale restaurant in most cities remain almost as lily white as during Jim Crow.

Because it was fundamentally about ending the Jim Crow segregation laws, the civil rights movement significantly addressed the problem of being black, however, in the final analysis, the movement failed to address the problem of being poor. Consequently, legal segregation is over, but oppression and discrimination persists in restaurants, housing, schools and other facilities that remain segregated while many blacks are still relegated to abject poverty.

Oppression cannot end by addressing a single aspect of that oppression, and intersectionality is about recognizing those different aspects.

To improve material conditions, oppressed people must have access to, among other things, quality education, health care, public facilities and the power to make our own decisions. These broad solutions must be further nuanced to address the particular realities of women or specific cultural or ethnic groups. Even as individual organizations build campaigns around one or two central issues, the framing used for those campaigns must facilitate uplinking to intersecting campaigns.

The Human Rights Framework features the inherently ability to intersect the full spectrum of human dignities deserving of protection. Class. Income. Race. Ethnicity. Gender. Sexual identity. Sexual preference. Geographic region. Country of origin. Country of residence. Customs. Religious beliefs. Political beliefs. Age. Humanity.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) serves as the charter for international human rights laws, protections and government obligations. The UDHR, and the human rights laws derived from that document, protects every aspect of humanity, from the right to an education to the right to vacation and leisure to the right to be free from disease causing pollution.

As such, utilizing the Human Rights Framework will enable organizational campaigns to identify and link with other organizational campaigns, building a connected movement in the process.

It is important here to note that intersectionality does not mean that each intersecting oppression weighs the same or that the uniqueness of one experience is washed out, dominated by or merged into another intersecting point.

For example, this society is thoroughly patriarchal, or male dominated sexism. Every woman is subject to and oppressed by patriarchy and sexism. However, the manner in which one group of women experiences sexism is very different from the way others experience the same.

An ongoing and important anti-patriarchal struggle is the fight against the glass ceiling, where qualified professional women are passed up for promotion to executive level jobs. The numbers are staggering: while representing over 50% of the general population, women only make up about 15% of executive boards and 5% of CEOs in fortune 500 companies. This is oppression and women have the human right

to be free from such discrimination.

However, even as a universal oppressor, the manner in which patriarchy is experienced differs almost unrecognizably from one group of women to another.

During this time of overly aggressive policing, a wildly disproportionate number of low-income black and Latina women are abused by the police state. On the side of economic crimes, Tanya McDowell (Norwalk, CT) and Kelley Williams-Bolar (Akron, OH), while attempting to secure a better education for their children, were both arrested and incarcerated for sending their children to public schools in districts they did not live, effectively criminalizing parenting while poor, a “crime” disproportionately impacting women. At the same time there appears to be a sharp rise in the number of beatings and sexual assaults, including rape, of low-income women of color at the hands of police.

While both are examples of patriarchy intersecting with other oppressions, the workplace and poverty respectively, intersectionality does not require either that the two wrongs are weighed the same or that they join together under one singular campaign. They both are, however, protected by the human rights and intersect easily under the Human Rights Framework.

Even if a campaign were waged that somehow ended police brutality tomorrow, that alone would not end oppression in low-income black communities because of the intersectionality of oppression. Sometimes campaigns can win on individual issues. However, only a tapestry of connected campaigns- a social movement- can end oppression, and intersectionality is an absolute prerequisite to building a cohesive social movement. The Human Rights Framework lays the groundwork for intersectionality as a practice, not just a theory.

Once we understand the ways in which oppressions intersect, we must link respective struggles together through interconnectivity.

### **Human Rights and Interconnectivity**

On one side of the equation, intersectionality helps us understand that injustice is not a singular wrong committed against one person or group, but a system of oppression that impacts many groups in many ways. That is to say, racism, sexism and classism are not three separate and unrelated sets of injustice, but comprise an intersecting system of oppression. On the other side, interconnectivity uplinks two or more fights- for example, the fight against police brutality and the fight against cuts to school budgets- connecting them to form a larger and more powerful movement.

Because police brutality does occur in isolation, it is a visible and integral part of a broader system of oppression, it cannot be stopped solely with campaigns against police brutality. It can only be stopped by understanding the relationship between a system of oppression and the police used to enforce that system and then connecting the fight against police abuse to the broader movement to end oppression.

Our task, then, is not limited to building an anti-police brutality campaign, but also to connect that

campaign to intersecting issues and uplink into a broader movement to end oppression against everyone. The Human Rights Framework helps make those connections.

Since the ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), international bodies have developed a broad and deep range of human rights principles and laws that are binding on every country in the world. In addition to rules dictating the way governments, through their military and police departments, treat human beings- not citizens, but all human beings- there is a broad body of human rights standards on issues as wide ranging as:

- forced displacement of indigenous or low income people (think: the fight against gentrification);
- the treatment of internally displaced people (applicable to victims of Hurricane Katrina);
- the rights of women (control over their own bodies and access to health care);
- the right of all peoples to live free from discrimination and violence because they differ from the majority (and standards specific to LGTBQ communities); and
- a series of economic rights addressing the needs of poor and marginalized communities.

These standards, covering a wide range of human needs, allows the Human Rights Framework to facilitate, even promote, the interconnection of issues and campaigns in at least two (2) ways:

First, the Human Rights Framework broadens the core issue(s) at stake, enabling local campaigns to transcend the artificial borders of cities and towns to build national and international support. Campaigns, for example, framed around an individual cop violating specific local laws or protocol, only draw the attention of those interested in municipal regulation. Similarly, framing more than a century of extra-judicial police killings of low-income blacks as a violation of US civil rights laws, has little appeal to those not living under the jurisdiction of the US government.

The “borderlessness” of the Human Rights Frame works in the exact opposite direction, broadening the core issue at stake (local police procedures vs. fundamental human rights) and opening the campaign to anyone with an interest in preserving human rights.

Incidentally, this broadening actively undercuts efforts to cast campaign supporters as outsiders bent on meddling in local affairs. When the issue at stake is a peculiar local law, the criticism carries a certain internal logic, even though the argument is still both wrong and a bogus attempt at diverting attention from injustice. By contrast, when the core issue is human rights, the only 'outsiders' are either those violating human rights or those who are not human.

The second way the Human Rights Frame promotes interconnectivity is by facilitating the linkage between two or more issues which might not seem, at first glance, directly connected. In this respect, the Human Rights Frame acts like a rail car coupler, linking separate rail cars heading in the same direction into a single, bigger and more powerful train. But instead of rail cars, human rights facilitates the connection or uplinking of issues to each other, allowing them to maintain their uniqueness while building a single, bigger and more powerful social justice movement.

The Human Rights Framework is also a pragmatic and effective leadership development tool to help members better conceptualize linkages between their campaign and other issues.

For example, some of the ongoing anti-immigrant vitriol centers around the breaking of US immigration laws. While the argument is often just a hypocritical cover for racism or xenophobia, some have internalized the logic: US laws apply to me and, therefore, should apply to would be immigrants.

Recently, as foreclosures decimated communities, ordinary people took a stand and participated in amazing campaigns to save families from foreclosure and eviction, including full eviction blockades. During this same time period, some powerful immigrant rights actions launched in Arizona and elsewhere, providing a seemingly irresistible opportunity to connect two disparate but timely issues, as a means of building a larger, stronger social justice movement.

This connection was stymied, at least in part, by prevailing attitudes about undocumented immigrants which persisted among some of the very homeowners facing foreclosure. Even as those homeowners benefited from collective action from the larger community, some expressed sentiments disparaging public housing residents, welfare recipients and immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants.

Because much of the anti-foreclosure campaigns were framed around homeowner rights, finding a way to connect that struggle to others was tortured, at best. In addition, organizational messaging about “good homeowners” who “played by the rules” established a line of division among those impacted by the crisis, instead of a point of unity. That line offered no support for either “irresponsible” homeowners or the majority of black and brown people who are not homeowners. Consequently, some of the anti-foreclosure framing could serve as a clinic on how to build narrow and unconnected campaigns designed to solve a single problem without building a movement.

Consider, by contrast, if the foreclosure crisis response employed a Human Rights Frame. The human right to housing is an internationally recognized fundamental right of each of every person, simply by virtue of their humanity. With this frame, not only would the divide between “good” and “bad” homeowner disappear, but so would the distinction between homeowner, renter, public housing resident and persons without homes. Many anti-foreclosure campaigns were confused or conflicted when renters in foreclosed homes sought help because the campaign and messaging were centered around homeownership. Under the Human Rights Frame, participation would not be exclusive to homeowners, but inclusive of any human being in need of housing.

Additionally, the Human Rights Frame could have facilitated linkages between that campaign and others. Once members affirm human rights as the basis for the campaign, connecting their fight to others becomes a matter of extending the same human rights to other humans, including those born in different countries. In addition to the human right to housing, there is a deep set of international laws and standards concerning the human rights of immigrants, including the undocumented. Of course, utilizing the Human Rights Frame does not guarantee members become immune to social prejudices or political

persuasions, but the internal logic of human rights actively promotes interconnectivity.

Incidentally, the Human Rights Frame in no way negates the significance of bank malfeasance or the other myriad of regulatory and policy issues associated with the foreclosure crisis. But once the foreclosure crisis has abated and if banks either stop breaking the law or simply change the law so it is not broken when they commit wrongs, only the human rights frame continues to extend the right to housing to everyone.

The Human Rights Frame facilitates connecting one campaign to another, building a social movement in the process.

### **The Human Rights frame does not compete with existing ideology**

While it can be used to connect struggles, the Human Rights Frame is not intended to replace, or even compete with, existing ideological tendencies or convictions. Malcolm X did not choose between human rights and his self described Black Nationalism and neither should local organizations with deep ideological commitments.

In fact, one of the legitimate critiques of the Human Rights Framework is that it falls short of a holistic ideology, silent on critical issues such as the economic exploitation inherent in capitalism. Additionally, because it is not an ideology, the Human Rights Frame is not an effective system for interpreting history or predicting future trends based on historic trends.

Organizations looking to sharpen those skills should probably examine any number of other ideological models and adopt the one which makes the most sense, or contribute to the history of thought by developing a new theory on human history and interaction or social transformation.

In the mean time, the Human Rights Framework should integrate well with most social justice messaging and might even serve as a backbone for deepening the understanding of intersectionality and interconnectivity. For organizations with an existing ideological orientation, the Human Rights Framework can complement, and need not compete with or replace, that orientation.

## CAMPAIGN DEMANDS

*“But the United Nations has what's known as the charter of human rights; it has a committee that deals in human rights... You spend so much time barking up the civil-rights tree, you don't even know there's a human-rights tree on the same floor.*

*When you expand the civil-rights struggle to the level of human rights, you can then take the case of the black man in this country before the nations in the UN. You can take it before the General Assembly. You can take Uncle Sam before a world court. But the only level you can do it on is the level of human rights... Human rights are the rights that are recognized by all nations of this earth. And any time any one violates your human rights, you can take them to the world court.”*

*- Malcolm X*

*The Ballot or the Bullet, March 1964*

### **We Can't Get There from Here**

Launching exclusively domestic campaigns seeking justice for a police murder contains a fatal contradiction: to win, we must utilize the same set of laws written by and for those who oppress us, rely on the same prosecutors that disproportionately imprison us, and plead to the same judicial system we consider hopelessly biased.

In order to secure an indictment, we must prove the police officer in question had no fear in his heart or mind when he gunned down the unarmed black male. It is almost as if the laws were written to benefit the police and work against low-income communities of color, who had no input in creating the law.

Using domestic laws and the standard set of demands- local prosecutors indict the cop; Department of Justice investigation; etc.- along with the standard campaign strategies to win those demands has proven ineffective. The social justice movement has not been able to convert the rash of police murders of unarmed black people into a rash of indictments, much less convictions, of police or even of vigilantes. The harsh reality is that the US legal system is not an effective venue from which to exact justice for these types of crimes. In the face of this fact, continuing to return to the same well is either insanity or really bad organizing.

If the social justice movement as a whole fails to evolve the framing and demands associated with police abuse campaigns, we will continue to lose ground on the issue, to the detriment of our constituency and, ultimately, even our own ability to organize.

In a real sense, the ultimate ends of the movement is to shift power so communities can exercise control over their own resources, such as the economy, political system, social services and the commons, including the police. But if fundamentally transforming power dynamics is the objective, the current set

of demands put forth by the social justice movement in the US will, frankly, never get us there.

Fredrick Douglas famously said “power concedes nothing without a demand.” If we accept these words as an axiom, then the next question must deal with the quality of our demands.

As currently structured, the primary demands for most US based social justice campaigns are incapable of fundamentally transforming society and shifting power to the masses of workers, much less the masses of the most harshly oppressed. That is to say, if organizations in the broader social justice movement somehow won every campaign demand, those demands would fail to transform society or fundamentally shift power.

In 2010, crowds of up to 100,000 swelled Madison, the capital of Wisconsin, to protest Governor Scott Walker's attacks on public unions. This impressive show of force captured national attention and drew initial comparisons to uprisings in Egypt earlier that same year. And what demands were the powers forced to grapple with? How would society be fundamentally transformed after this worker's uprising? Public sector unions would retain the right to collective bargaining.

To be clear, this is an important right which must be fought for and protected. However, if wildly successful, the protests would have provided a net of zero additional jobs, no additional police accountability measures and no improvement in the lives of the black population of Wisconsin, suffering from shocking disparities in wealth and incarceration rates. Not one demand was proposed on their behalf, much less in conjunction with them. It is not clear the largest worker mobilization in years even qualified as reformist, as the demands, if met, would have only maintained the status quo, a condition with devastating implications for low-income communities of color throughout the state.

Similarly, in response to the foreclosure crisis, most campaigns on the issue shared a common demand: reduce mortgage principle for homeowners facing eviction. Even if wildly successful, these campaigns would saddle homeowners with hundreds of thousands of dollars in new mortgages and rewarded the same banks being protested with new business. The demand would have built zero units of affordable housing and helped no one who was not already a homeowner. A successful series of campaigns would reset the status quo to pre-housing boom levels, setting the stage for... another housing boom.

After local police murder one of our community members, the ensuing campaigns often share the fundamental demand of a US Department of Justice (DOJ) investigation. The DOJ, of course, does not generally conduct its own investigations, they hand that work off to the FBI. Additionally, the DOJ does not investigate police murders, limiting the scope of their investigation to violations of civil rights laws.

Therefore, even if wildly successful, these campaigns would have the single greatest law enforcement violator of black rights in US history- the FBI- lead the investigation into the violation of black rights by local law enforcement. Further, because they only focus on civil rights violations, the investigation into the murder of an unarmed black male is prohibited from charging anyone with the crime of murder.

Our campaigns do not always exact concessions, but even if we win and all of our demands are met and implemented exactly as promised, they would fail to achieve fundamental transformation because the demands, in far too many instances, suck.

As proof of Fredrick Douglas' axiom, no people have ever tripped and, by mistake, fallen into liberation. No oppressors have accidentally given up their power and privilege while the oppressed sat silent. If the words of Fredrick Douglas, and history itself, are accurate guideposts, we will not be able to achieve revolutionary changes in this society without first revolutionizing our movement, organizations and campaigns. Towards the revolution of campaigns, we must think differently about demand development and the demands themselves.

### **Human Rights Centered Demands**

By employing the expanded field of the Human Rights framework, some of the artificially imposed limitations on campaign vision are lifted, enabling the pursuit of demands that fundamentally alter power dynamics and transform communities.

Recognizing the inherent conflict in what he called the fox guarding the chicken house, Malcolm X asserted the US government was incapable of investigating itself on our behalf, and instead, took the Human Rights Frame to it's natural conclusion: we should deliver our complaints to the United Nations World Court and Human Rights Council.

Malcolm X correctly pointed out that elevating our fight to the level of human rights unlocks an entirely new set of ground rules upon which the game is set: international human rights law. Therefore, instead of relying on domestic US laws, he urged taking the case of the systematic oppression and discrimination of black and brown communities by the US, and it's states or municipalities, to the United Nations Human Rights Council using international law to prosecute the government for violating human rights laws and standards.

International law is light years ahead of US law in terms of recognizing the primacy of human beings over property, corporations or relationship to the state (i.e., government employee). For example, human rights law focuses on the impact of an action (the cop killed an unarmed human being) rather than the intent behind an action (the cop claiming the unarmed teenager made him fear for his life).

In the final year of his life, Malcolm X engaged in his biggest most ambitious campaign: bringing the US government before the UN World Court to face charges of violating the human rights of millions of African descendants. This was more than just rhetoric. Malcolm X met with ambassadors of African nations at the UN headquarters in New York and traveled to Africa to meet heads of state. In the July 1964 meeting of the Organization of African Unity, Malcolm X petitioned the body to initiate an investigation, through the UN Commission on Human Rights, into violations of human rights by the US government.

Malcolm X understood that the greatest opportunity to end the patterns and practices of localized police

brutality did not lie in firing a small town police chief or replacing the white occupying forces with black occupying forces, but by claiming our human rights, thereby upgrading our local skirmishes into international struggles.

Malcolm X was murdered while- maybe even because- he was laying the groundwork for an international response to local police violence by calling on black heads of state to intervene on behalf of blacks in the US.

Realities on the ground make it imperative to pick up Malcolm X's mantle and frame the fight against police abuse- as well as the fight for housing, health care, education, women's rights, LGBTQ equity and others- in terms of our human rights. When unarmed low-income people of color are killed by police, the discussion must immediately turn to our human rights.

The frame takes on greater meaning as our campaign demands center around enforcing the individual human rights of the victim and the collective human rights of the impacted community. Individual demands must hold both the individual cop and the state responsible for the murder and human rights violations of the victim. Collective demands alters the behavior of the state, through policy changes, and shifts power to the community.

When low-income black people are killed by the police, we must assert their human rights and then file complaints to the UN Human Rights Council to investigate federal, state and local governments on charges of violating our human rights.

### **Demand Levels**

Demands are multi-faceted (individual or collective; transactional, transitional or transformative; etc.), but here the focus is on the facet of Local, National and Movement Building demands. Each is unique, but powerful campaigns manage to hit the sweet spot that encompasses all three components.

Even as police brutality is a national epidemic, it manifests locally and **Local Demands** are designed to deal with the situation on the ground and meet the needs of those directly impacted by local police abuse. This definition includes demands specifically geared towards the impacted family, but is also inclusive of the local community impacted by daily instances of police abuse in an individual and systemic sense.

Local Demands are demands that:

- Meet the wants and needs of the victim's family;
- Addresses individuals responsible for gross misconduct in the local community;
- Addresses particular problems highlighted by the specific incident;
- Changes specific institutions in the local community;
- Changes local policies, laws and practices;

The development of this component should be led, and even dominated, by local community members

and organizations. National organizations or individuals coming in to provide support should take the lead from a local organization. There is always the danger of local organizations becoming insular and drawing improper generalizations based on a specific set of circumstances, so seeking out and accepting outside participation in this process is a good check on those tendencies as well as a good movement building practice.

Not all of these demands are going to be transformational or shift power from the state to local residents, and not all of them must.

**National Demands** address the problem of police abuse and the prison industrial complex from a national lense. National demands do not limit themselves to a single geographic region or even a narrow subject area. The biggest difference between local and national demands is the impacted target area. A federal review of a local police department is a Local demand, and, for example, federal anti-racial profiling legislation, that applies to all states, is a National demand.

National Demands are demands that:

- Address the aspirations of the impacted class (economic, racial, gender, social, cultural, etc.);
- Address national trends (whether or not present in the local instance);
- Have national impact or implications (not just local);
- Change national policies, laws and practices;

Not all National Demands are transformative or shift power, and not all of them must.

**Movement Building Demands** are those that accomplish one of three objectives:

- a) change power relationships;
- b) heighten contradictions; or
- c) engage people for the long term, as opposed to transactional demands after which people tend to end their relationship with the organization or movement. In other words, organize people and connect issues.

Movement Building demands can be local or national, but accomplishes one of the three stated objectives.

Movement Building Demands are demands that:

- Shift power from the police or state to the community;
- Demonstrate social contradictions and move towards resolving the contradiction (not the complaint about the contradiction);
- Empower the community with control over the police or government agencies;
- Empower the community to provide for themselves;
- Compel community members to remain involved and engaged over a long period of time;
- Connect the specific issue with other movement issues;

As a general rule, specific pieces of legislation are rarely Movement Building demands, as they tend to encourage people to mobilize in order to pass a law and then, once passed, declare victory, de-mobilize and not see each other again until the next tragedy. Legislation might be required in order to advance a Movement Building demand, but in those instances, the Movement Building aspect is not the legislation, but rather the thing the legislation facilitates.

The above Local, National and Movement Building components are not demands, but a way to think about developing demands to meet local needs and build of a national movement to end police abuse in low income black communities. The concepts also apply to other issues or objectives.

While there are many demands, including some specific to each community, in pursuit of an interconnected, even if decentralized, movement to end police abuse, there must be a set of central movement wide demands for Ferguson and beyond. At their heart, these demands must attempt to radically shift power from the police to residents of local communities and, while locally applicable, must have national implications.

Below are some proposed local and national demands. They are not Movement Building demands, but are tangible and measurable (as opposed to, for example 'end police brutality'). These proposed demands are intended to spark discussion, not serve as a decree:

### **Local**

- Jail killer cops and charge them with murder;
- Demands involving specific people (fire a District Attorney, police chief, police officer, etc.);
- Demands involving specific agencies;

### **National**

- Require police departments to keep records on each shooting and death;
- No federal funding for police agencies that statistically demonstrate racial profiling in stops, arrests, complaints or abuse of power;
- De-militarize the police;
- Federal investigation into police practices in the US;
- Automatic investigation into every police shooting;

These demands are common and good, however, far too many campaigns focus on the local at the neglect of the national demands. In those instances, even if the campaign is successful, the only beneficiaries are those living in or passing through that particular jurisdiction. We cannot afford to re-fight the same battles in each and every police jurisdiction in America. We must secure universal victories that help everyone in one swoop.

### **The Local-National Tension**

It is important here to address the real and legitimate dichotomy between the demands and interests of local organizations and national organizations and how those tensions play out in developing demands.

While there is plenty of harmony between local and national interests in local campaigns with national implications, there are tensions as well. These tensions are a natural and inevitable aspect of structural contradictions present in the local-national dynamic in social movements and even single organizations. This is a naturally occurring contradiction, not a battle between right and wrong.

To be clear, sometimes there are bad actors, which only serves to confuse the issue, but we must plan around structural design, not individual bad actors. Of course, national organizations should come in to provide support to local organizations, rather than take over, in some level of partnership. And if the local group is not doing things they agree with, instead of running over the local group, the nationals should find another local group to support.

A disturbing trend is the extent to which locals are picking up the language of oppressive forces and calling national actors “outside agitators.” This phrase has historically been used by those in power to isolate local organizations and shut down movement building. Can we even imagine a civil rights movement with no “outside agitators”?

Legitimate political differences should be vigorously struggled over. However, reducing political disagreement to who lives here and who is an “outside agitator” will prove fatal to the long term viability of building a strong and powerful social justice movement.

### **Movement Building Demands: Demands that Build Power**

In any democratic society, local communities must exercise control over the Commons or public goods, provided that exercise does not violate the rights of others. Parks, libraries, schools, public housing and even the police, are all Commons or public goods and should be controlled by the communities they serve. By and large, this happens in well-to-do majority white communities where the relationship between police and residents is radically different than what is seen in urban communities of color.

In the final analysis, the social justice movement must be about shifts in power that are fundamental, radical and even revolutionary. While there are many factors to building such a movement, one factor is constant: there can be no radical shifts in power without radical demands for shifts in power.

Developing transformative Movement Building demands requires careful consideration and rigorous thought in a collective process. Grassroots organizations must uplink into a national movement and delve into the process with gusto.

Given the predominant power dynamics between low-income black communities and the US and local governments, the process of complaining to the perpetrator about the crime is fatally flawed and demonstrably ineffective. As such, in the context of the Human Rights Framework and in the legacy of Malcolm X, the central Movement Building demand must be launching a United Nations investigation into oppression in general, police practices in particular, targeting low-income black communities.

At this juncture, it is vital to underscore two critical nuances:

First, the UN investigation is not the objective or goal, but rather a means of achieving the objective or goal. As such, the time will come when the demand must be refined- for example, to include consideration for the specific set of oppressions faced by women or the LGBT community- or shifted all together. Means and strategies must be flexible enough to change according to conditions on the ground, and a UN led investigation is a means, not the ends.

And second, ending police abuse is only one part of the equation. If there was no more police abuse, but black unemployment remained twice the national average, incarceration rates continue disproportionately impacting our communities, our educational opportunities continue to decline and we lack access to basic social services, then we have not ended oppression or empowered communities.

Movement Building demands can be local, national or both, but are characterized by the following objectives:

- a) change power relationships;
- b) heighten contradictions; or
- c) engage people for the long term, as opposed to transactional demands after which people tend to end their relationship with the organization or movement. In other words, organize people and connect issues.

Below are a series of Movement Building demands, categorized as Local or National. Again, these proposals are intended as a starting point for discussion, not the end point:

### **Local Movement Building Demands**

- a full United Nations Human Rights Council investigation into the killing by police/security guard/vigilante;
- a UN Human Rights Council investigation into the US of teargas and other chemicals, provided by the US government and deployed by local police departments, as well as the use of disproportionate force, collective punishment and indiscriminate force against people protesting government misconduct in their own communities (where applicable);
- a vote, pursuant to the consent of the governed, to determine if low income communities of color would prefer to keep their existing police forces or disband them and start from scratch with new ones;
- full amnesty for protesters (including those rebelling);
- establish local civilian oversight over police as an 'investigative' body, empowered to launch independent investigations into instances of police abuse;
- recognize the legality and legitimacy of community patrols protecting residents against police abuse;
- massive investment into community controlled economic development, education, social services and infrastructure in low income black communities;

### National Movement Building Demands

- a full UN Human Rights Council investigation in the killing of hundreds of black and brown people by local police departments throughout the US;
- deployment of UN Peace-keepers to the US to protect protesters and victims of natural disasters (such as hurricanes) from US federal and local government crackdowns against dissent and forcible displacement, including the use of teargas as a potential chemical weapon, indiscriminate arrests of protesters and the media, collective punishment and other outlawed actions;
- a full UN Human Rights Council investigation into the 'Stand Your Ground' or 'Castle Doctrine' laws and the extent to which they are discriminatory or encourage murder (where applicable);
- Establish a national civilian oversight over police as an 'investigative' body, empowered to launch independent investigations into instances of police abuse;
- a UN Human Rights Council investigation into the systematic oppression and discrimination which creates urban ghettos in the US;
- massive investment into community controlled economic development, education, social services and infrastructure in low income black communities;

The venn diagram below helps visualize the demand placement:



The primary logistical question for local organizations, already stretched to the limit, is how to fashion,

write and deliver complaints to UN bodies without exhausting all available resources. There are a number of human rights organizations willing to assist grassroots groups in this effort and we must build relationships with them in order to access this type of technical assistance.

The primary movement questions must be centered around developing- and then winning- ambitious campaigns that radically shift power to communities. On the heels of the economic and foreclosure crisis, the recent rash of police shootings, coupled with the NSA spying revelations and the militarization of the police, are forcing everyday people to rethink their relationship to the state security apparatus. To what extent will the social justice movement play a role in envisioning, articulating and fighting for a new relationship to the police.

For low income black communities, the time has come for us to follow in the steps of Malcolm X, in words and deed:

*We declare our right on this earth... to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary.*

- Malcolm X, 1965