

US Social Forum: Rising from the Grassroots

Wednesday 12 September 2007, by [FLAHERTY Jordan](#), [McCRAE Kiyoko](#), [TISDALE Leonora](#) (Date first published: 16 June 2007).

A breathtaking and unprecedented array of leaders and activists from grassroots movements across the US have been building for this year's US Social Forum (USSF), June 27-July 1 in Atlanta, Georgia. Organizations and networks have strategized and planned for months—not just how to get there, but more importantly how best to use the USSF as a tool to support their organizing, and to connect their work with broader movements. Formerly incarcerated and their family and friends from across the US have organized a “family reunion” that will meet at the USSF. High school and college students have been organizing in their schools. Bus caravans will be traveling from points across the US. And this is just the beginning. Below, *Left Turn Magazine* presents the voices of some of those who have been preparing for the USSF.

Rev. Kenneth Glasgow, Founder of The Ordinary People Society (T.O.P.S.), Dothan, Alabama *T.O.P.S. is a nonprofit, faith-based organization that offers hope, without regard to race sex, creed, color or social status, to individuals and their families who suffer the effects of drug addiction, incarceration, homelessness, unemployment, hunger and illness, through comprehensive faith-based programs that provide a continuum of unconditional acceptance and care.*

What is the work you're involved in?

All of our work is based on Matthew verses 25-36. We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, we have a feeding ministry, we do gang prevention and intervention for at risk youth, we also do an elderly project, we get the ex-felons to be the ones who do this, to bring food and assistance, including meals on wheels.

How do you see the work you're doing intersecting with a larger movement or movements?

The Prison Industrial Complex is a vast growing and money making complex. If you look at the issues we face, if you look at the money that's spent to lock people up, it all fits into a larger movement. There are people who don't have voting rights because they were in prison, or because they are immigrants. You have people oppressed because they can't get housing. Its not how our work fits into the movement, it's how the movement fits into all these issues.

How do you see the US Social Forum relating with your work?

I was on crack, and in prison, for twelve years. For people who have been to prison, there are different rules. There is a hierarchy in society. That hierarchy not only makes the laws, but classifies the people. The USSF is about addressing that inequality, addressing the other inequalities that exist, and facing that oppression so people feel the space to express that.

All of us are suffering separately. When we come together, we see the power of all of us. In coming together, we can see the connection between us.

We're putting together a family reunion at the USSF. It's for the formerly incarcerated, their family and friends, to get together. It is a reunion of all of us affected by these issues. We want to come together, in this space, across different backgrounds, across regions; it's an open space to meet each other, to see how we can be stronger together.

At least 100 people from our organization will be at the USSF. We're working towards bringing at least 400-500 people from Alabama.

Aubry Jeanjacques, Youth Organizer with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, New Orleans, Louisiana

The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond is a national and international collective of anti-racist, multicultural community organizers and educators dedicated to building an effective movement for social transformation. The People's Institute considers racism the primary barrier preventing communities from building effective coalitions and overcoming institutionalized oppression and inequities .

What is the work you're involved in?

I'm a trainer in training for People's Institute. The People's Institute was founded in 1980 by the late Dr. Jim Dunn, and Ron Chisolm, who met up at a training around organizing, liked each other's perspectives and analyses and started it.

They recognized that the work couldn't be done without youth presence in the work they were doing. You gotta have someone to pass the torch to. The Freedom School in New Orleans was organized by Kool Black (Robert Horton) to teach kids about racism, community organizing, and leadership development. In 1999, I attended Kool Black's summer camp—it was run in the St. Thomas housing development. Kool knew that young folks should be having conversations about racism. We only knew racism as lynchings, dogs attacking, and stuff, and we weren't seeing that anymore. Where does racism stand now if that's not happening? So we started understanding racism as a mental state of mind.

My eleven-year-old sister kept bugging me about going to this camp. I kept hearing it as "school" and I don't want to go voluntarily to school in the summer. But Kool is the MAN to a lot of young males, and he called and asked me to come. How could I say no to a guy who's played such an amazing role in my life, who I look at like a father, you know?

I got there and saw lots of other young Black males there who were interested in the work. That kept me there. They weren't too cool to be doing what they were doing. I grew up in St. Thomas, spent my whole life in projects. Only thing I had seen was dealing drugs and damn near in jail. All the Black males was in all that kind of hype like that. So I see other kids who looked like me, walked like me, talked like me, and I thought, "Well damn! Here's other young black males really involved, really concerned with others' well being, not just themselves."

How do you see the work you're doing intersecting with a larger movement or movements?

A lot of times I don't see the work we're doing here connecting until I travel and tell other folks about what I'm doing. I really don't see a lot of times my work as tied to anywhere but New Orleans. You can't go into other folks' back yards and fix that unless yours is straight. I want to make sure New Orleans is straight, my hometown is straight. Other folks in other places say you're pretty much

doing the same work we're doing. I would say that as long as I'm doing the work that I am here in New Orleans, I see it contributing.

How do you see the US Social Forum relating with your work?

The Freedom School national trip this year is to the USSF. To have thousands of young folks, people doing work around social change and racism—it'd be a blast to have people together.

It's important to have a full session around Hurricane Katrina. A lot of folks are confused, like, damn, why did that happen? You want to know what racism is? Hurricane Katrina is it. A lot of folks not from New Orleans are confused about what happened. Folks from around the country want to have that conversation.

Carlos Jimenez, National Coordinator of the Student Labor Action Project (SLAP) , Washington, DC

SLAP supports, advises, and solidifies the student-labor work that is energizing campuses and communities across the country. SLAP has maximized the depth and breadth of this new student movement by facilitating networking, training, material development, and technical assistance for student activists. SLAP is a network of students from a wide array of student organizations that cut across a diverse grouping of students.

What is the work you're involved in?

We work to engage students around issues of economic justice, such as worker's rights on and off campus, living wages, immigrant worker rights, access to education...and ensure that those issues are also being brought out to the broader local community, integrating and forming cohesive relationships in communities.

We work with lots of different groups—student-labor groups, student of color organizations, student governments, faith based organizations...We are a resource and want to be useful to students.

Right now, we just wrapped up helping coordinate the National Student Labor Week of Action that saw around 200 actions from March 31-April 4. We're working to sustain the same work of campus-community link, and in the coming year we're looking to kick up the level and intensity on living wage campaigns cross the country after the merging in of the Living Wage Action Coalition. Local campaigns driven by local needs, issues of economic rights, training, strategy, fluidity and continuation—that's what we're working on.

How do you see the work you're doing intersecting with a larger movement or movements?

We're set up from the get go to make sure students are connecting to others organizing in the local community. And not only the usual suspects, but making sure students of color, women, lgbtq folks are specifically involved and taking on issues affecting our communities.

We're all the time working on issues that affect the larger community, not just one campus, one town. Our work links the work on one campus to similar work going on in other places. The USSF is bringing together all these folks to do something like that—to create a bigger network. It's so important, collaborating with one another to launch cohesive campaigns.

How do you see the US Social Forum relating with your work?

It's an opportunity to have strategic access to a lot of folks. The USSF is a way to connect people

working on issues in different parts of the country, as a time for trainings and teaching for students, and as a way to get people really excited to continue doing the work they're doing. We're trying to get a coalition of students from key cities together. We've developed scholarships for folks from Miami, Philly, Chicago, California, Boston, Wisconsin, Oregon—folks who will be working intensively on campaigns in the next year to all be there to get trained, get ideas to bring back home, meet one another and connect. We're organizing broad delegations from campuses to get folks trained, connected to each other and excited. We've been asking ourselves how to support a lot of this work, and how to be a real resource and of assistance to students. Hopefully we'll help about 50-60 students in coming.

One of the main things we want to get out of the conference is a bigger plenary, or broader discussion, on local and national levels of the college organizing scope. We want to unite activism in college campuses around lots of issues—antiwar, reproductive rights, access to education, environmental and economic justice. To use the USSF as means for coming together.

Genaro Rendon, Director of the Southwest Workers Union, San Antonio, Texas

SWU is a grassroots, multi-issue membership based organization representing over 2700 school workers, youth and community members.

What is the work you're involved in?

Our focus is on environmental justice, labor justice, youth empowerment and youth organizing, and border justice. Cutting across all of those areas, we do leadership and membership development trainings. We want all of our members to be up to speed and savvy about what's going on, to have a political education. Membership building is the other piece that cuts across it all. To have the power to converge people.

How do you see the work you're doing intersecting with a larger movement or movements?

Internationally we're building relations with international allies. The vision is global. How does our work contribute to larger struggle? We're continually asking ourselves that.

How do you see the US Social Forum relating with your work?

We're part of the People's Freedom Caravan that's leaving from Albuquerque, New Mexico on June 22. Two buses of about 100 people will drive to San Antonio. In San Antonio we'll be joined by another 50 people—we'll have a daylong program, a march, barbeque, and cultural night. The next day we drive to Houston for a local event there. Then an action in Lake Charles, Louisiana at the Southwest Louisiana Chamber of Commerce, then on to New Orleans.

New Orleans is working on four buses—one to go North with the rest of the Caravan and other ones to move East along the Gulf Coast, along I-10 through Mobile, then North and all the buses will converge in Selma/Montgomery. Wednesday morning, June 27, we'll be rolling into Atlanta with at least 500-700 people.

It's creating a space to not just show up individually. To bring the USSF to each city, so people will know what some of the voices and stories of folks who can't participate. In every town we're gonna have a culture share, folks can come out and be part of the USSF even if they can't go themselves. We'll have banners with messages from each city—folks in towns the buses pass through can write messages, stories, whatever on banners that will be hung in tents and other spaces at the USSF. The Freedom Caravan is based on the summer Freedom Rides through the South in 1961.

The USSF is an open space that gives credibility to every movement. Everybody coming together is a sign of power, sign of convergence. We have to galvanize force and come out with some concrete measures for change.

We're looking specifically at the South and Southwest—the historical nature of colonialism and slavery. Currently Blacks and Latinos are wedged against each other by mainstream media. But the similarities are more prevalent than differences—our working class background, our histories of struggle, food, culture. We need to be uniting as organizations and regions. The South by Southwest tent at the USSF will be space to come together, work to create some power in these two areas.

Teresa Almaguer, Youth Program Coordinator of People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights (PODER), San Francisco, CA

PODER is a grassroots environmental justice organization based in San Francisco's Mission District. PODER's mission is to organize with Mission residents to work on local solutions to issues facing low-income communities and communities of color. PODER believes that the solutions to community problems depend on the active participation of all people in decision-making processes.

What is the work you're involved in?

We're 16-years-old, founded in the Mission district in San Francisco. We work on environmental justice issues, primarily in the Latino community to improve quality of life.

Gentrification has led us to do popular education on developers. The community has a voice and leadership development is a way to channel that voice. We are always trying to get more community participation. We ask ourselves, how do we build assets? How do we increase the number of homeowners? Our neighborhood is disappearing. Our communities are being dispersed.

We develop youth leadership. The youth work on a hands-on campaign, under the principle that we are the experts in the neighborhood and are therefore best suited to address the problems in our communities. The youth do research, surveys, organize community meetings and trainings, and advocate on behalf of their community.

We use all kinds of avenues for social change. In the past, youth have also worked on city planning. If there is a space available in the community, who is going to have access to it? What will be built on it? What opportunities will be available for youth?

We have an Environmental Justice program that combines these issues with housing issues. We work with cross-cultural leadership—Chinese and Latinos—through the Chinese Progressive Association. Both communities live in the same neighborhoods and face a lot of the same problems, like lack of resources and access to resources.

How do you see the work you're doing intersecting with a larger movement or movements?

We are part of an international community because we work with immigrants. Latin America is always in our hearts. We are constantly faced with the question of why people are unable to stay in their homes in Latin America and have to move here. Good jobs, union jobs are leaving and causing unemployment in the United States. It is important to make those connections. Environmental justice is not just for us, locally. It's an issue that affects many communities. How do we all work together to achieve environmental justice? We contribute to the larger movement by building leadership in our own communities.

How do you see the US Social Forum relating with your work?

The USSF is an opportunity to build and expand on ideas and energy and support one another. As of now 25 members are going, 18 of which are under 18.

Through their participation in the Youth Organizing Training Institute with the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, a network of 60 affiliate organization, our youth members will be linking with other youth groups and learn from one another.

We will be driving there. Many of our members are families. Youth in the program go through training and often their parents are training them. They are given a lot of support and encouragement. We try to be as intergenerational as possible. I grew out of the youth movement, which can be isolating. I like to think of social change as being most effective when the work is intergenerational.

We will organize a training day before and throughout the USSF to educate youth about global justice issues and the civil rights movement. Project South is organizing a civil rights tour for our youth. I feel that this is very important that our members, especially our youth, don't feel lost throughout the USSF. We would like our members to take part in meaningful exchanges and be really trying to have a voice in the process. It's important to try to make the movement exciting and not get bored by intellectuals. We are thinking about how to meaningfully participate, and to carry the work forward and plan actions locally. We want to be able to contribute what we have learnt to others.

In the Bay area, planning for the USSF has brought many organizations together. We have been focusing on fundraising and political education workshops to talk about the different issues that will be raised at the USSF. We would like to collaborate with other organizations to work together after the USSF. We have already started networking with other organizations and look forward to networking more at the USSF. Also, our members will be joining the Gulf Coast People's Caravan in New Orleans.

Cassandra Stewart, Youth Intern with the Southwest Organizing Project, Albuquerque, New Mexico

SWOP is a statewide multi-racial, multi-issue, community based membership organization. Since 1980, SWOP has worked to make it possible for thousands of New Mexicans to begin to have a place and voice in social, economic and environmental decisions that affect their lives. Their mission is "working to empower our communities to realize racial and gender equality and social and economic justice."

What is the work you're involved in?

It's a grassroots, community based organization. We work to empower the disenfranchised. We work with poor communities of color to make gender and racial equality a reality and to create social and economic justice.

We do door knocking. We talk about issues in the community. We get people involved in issues they see as pressing. We do a lot of empowerment work. We don't speak for people, we go and find out what people care concerned about and work with them.

We have a youth rights campaign—we want to give young people better options, better choices than war or prison. We've been working on getting into schools. The administrations are so afraid to let

people hear the other side. We're working with the school board too—to exercise our right to present alternatives to students. But it's hard to get access. In lower-income schools, administrations don't want federal funding revoked. So they're fearful of any type of criticism. But if you can't get in through the administration, you get in through the students.

How do you see the work you're doing intersecting with a larger movement or movements?

In New Mexico we're good at empowering and strengthening local communities. We want to work on collaborating with national struggles and building strength, especially in the South. All the work we do here in New Mexico around water issues, racism and environmental racism, is all directly related to things going on in the South, New Orleans specifically. Our struggles are very similar.

The Freedom Caravan, which we are co-organizing, is a place to build strong, solid relationships—relationships that demonstrate a willingness to struggle and work together.

How do you see the US Social Forum relating with your work?

The Freedom Caravan started out as an idea of ours to get to the USSF. We want to caravan for the media attention but also for economic reasons—it's cheaper than flying 100 people out. We're raising money to make it happen. We made 500 enchiladas for Cinco de Mayo and sold 'em for \$10 a plate. People are committed to raising money for the delegation. Ally organizations and our membership are committed to sending people to Atlanta. All of our members' costs are subsidized.

When we first pitched the idea of caravanning to other organizations, people were skeptical. How to get people to take 2 weeks off of work? But people totally committed. Here we are a month and a half before and two buses are completely booked by people who are gonna take two weeks to go across the country and to the USSF.

In each place the caravan goes we want to learn about local struggle, learn about how local struggles are similar, how to work together to create change.

P.S.

* Kiyoko McCrae, an organizer primarily working in the anti-war and environmental justice movements, currently resides in New Orleans. She is also an artist interested in exploring ways in which art instigates and supports radical social change.

Leonora Tisdale lives, writes, and bartends in New Orleans. She'll be farming with teenagers in Vermont for the summer.

Jordan Flaherty is part of the editorial collective of Left Turn Magazine. Many of his articles from New Orleans are online at <http://www.leftturn.org/?q=node/660>.