

## Fighting Racism as Jews: Beyond Black/Jewish Dialogue **Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz**



Youth activists of the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence speak out in Albany during the trial of the police officers who shot Amadou Diallo. photo: Kristine M. Samms

As JFREJ set out to work for racial justice in New York, many people, holding onto old paradigms of race and race-relations, assumed that meant two things. First they thought we'd limit our coalition work primarily to African Americans—indeed, when JFREJ began our first sustained alliance-building work with the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association in 1993, some people actually questioned whether that fell inside our mission. And second, many people asked whether we'd be organizing any Black/Jewish dialogue groups.

The question of dialogue groups was easy: while JFREJ certainly supports communication and education, we also believe that calls for "dialogue" often serve as an end run around difficult facts of inequality between our two communities—inequalities in status, safety, and communal and individual resources. Such conversations are at best a partial fix to entrenched problems that require concerted organizing to change.

The assumptions about the category of race, though, are more complex. Many aspects of American culture and history reinforce the idea that race is a black thing: on one hand, racism itself, which tends to simplify the complex and homogenize diversity; on the other, the leadership of African Americans in shaping the civil rights agenda; the role of African slave labor in creating the wealth of this nation; the "queuing effect," whereby many members of immigrant groups have—and continue to—cut in ahead of African Americans on the line to upward mobility.

At the same time, a strong Black/Jewish alliance developed over many years not only in the civil rights movement of the '50s and '60s, but also in the Communist Party, radical unions, the election of Chicago Mayor Harold Washington, and the first Dinkins mayoral campaign in New York City. Flawed and problematic as this alliance may be, the history of progressive movements in many of our cities practically is a history of Black/Jewish alliance. Without idealizing Jews or exaggerating our importance, productive alliance between our two communities signifies the possibility—and often the reality—of cross-racial alliance. And, African Americans are the most predictably progressive constituency in the nation.

All this argues that while Jewish/Black relations is not a privileged category of JFREJ activism, working in coalition with progressive African American groups is critical to any anti-racist struggle.

What has emerged in JFREJ's insistently dual focus on racial and economic justice is a complex agenda that recognizes racial and cultural diversity. Today's progressive landscape includes new forms and alliances springing into action. In New York City, where Jewish and African descent communities are huge and diverse, including large groups of recent immigrants; where police harassment, brutality and racial profiling target young men of all colors; and where the collapse of public education punishes most of the city's poor, working, and lower middle-class

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Brad Lander and his son Marek give the JFREJ spiel to a New York Times reporter.

JFREJ has been for me a profound space for political and cultural education. Over the past eight years, JFREJ has helped me develop a better understanding of progressive politics. New York City, the role of allies, wrestling with racism as a Jew, strategic activism, Jewish communities in NYC and beyond, sweatshops, police brutality, and so many other issues. While we never feel we have enough time to talk about the underlying issues, JFREJ has been—since my campus days—one of the few places where I can combine action and analysis, theory and practice, and grow as a person and a progressive in the process. I can't wait for JFREJ's second decade, when our son Marek will be old enough to start coming to the youth actions!

— Brad Lander, 31, is the Executive Director of the Fifth Avenue Committee, and serves on the boards of the New York City Organizing Support Center, the Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development, Grassroots Leadership, and JFREJ.

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children, it is part of our Jewish job to approach the struggle against racism and for economic justice in its broadest and most inclusive parameters.

JFREJ was created to fracture a falsely monolithic right-wing Jewish face in order to claim the power and voice of progressive Jews, to bring us to a point where we identify clear political goals and priorities and work together because of what we stand for, seeking to join others along lines of political belief, values, priorities, frequently taking leadership from our allies and shaping our agenda in concert with them. So while we work to stabilize JFREJ's existence as an organization and community, JFREJ's role in anti-racist struggle is and should be far from stable; rather it is an evolving process of channeling loud pushy progressive Jewish energy onto the political landscape.

When we continue our economic justice work with Chinese Staff and Workers or in solidarity with a host of unions and workers in struggles to organize, our anti-police brutality work with the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, the Haitian community, as well as the National Action Network; when we oppose the death penalty because it is both wrong and racist; when we join with the Filipino-American community after the hate-attack on a Los Angeles Jewish community center and murder of Joseph Ito, and with the Black Radical Congress in the campaign for Public Education/Not Incarceration, we come closest to the multiracial justice-seeking movement JFREJ was created to foster: not out of a do-gooder impulse, but from an intense longing to participate in the labor of creating a just and generous world, the world we want to live in. ●

—Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz is the co-chair of JFREJ, and the author of several books, including *The Issue is Power: Essays on Women, Violence, and Resistance*, and currently serves as Director of the Queens College/Worker Education Extension Center. She served as JFREJ's first Executive Director.