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# CASTING SHADOWS

Chokwe Lumumba and the Struggle for Racial Justice and Economic Democracy in Jackson, Mississippi

By Kali Akuno

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The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation is an internationally operating, progressive non-profit institution for civic education. In cooperation with many organizations around the globe, it works on democratic and social participation, empowerment of disadvantaged groups, alternatives for economic and social development, and peaceful conflict resolution.

The New York Office serves two major tasks: to work around issues concerning the United Nations and to engage in dialogue with North American progressives in universities, unions, social movements, and politics.

## **“As the South Goes...So Goes the Nation”**

W.E.B Du Bois wrote these famous words in *Black Reconstruction*, linking America's promise of democracy to the horrendous conditions for Black people in the South. Sadly, the State of Mississippi has long been a bellwether in this regard, from slavery and lynchings to Jim Crow, segregation, and ongoing voter disenfranchisement. Today, Mississippi has both the country's largest Black population by percentage and its highest poverty rate. This is not a coincidence but an illustration of how economic inequality goes hand in hand with racial discrimination.

On the flip side of history, Mississippi has also long been a fertile ground for transformative social struggles, from Fannie Lou Hamer to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; and as a cradle of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. In the current period, Mississippi remains a laboratory for experiments in deep democracy and radical visions of what a New South could look like. A popular People's Assembly, based out of the state capitol of Jackson and supported by organizing groups including the New Afrikan People's Organization and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, gave rise to the mayoral election of longtime activist and left Black nationalist Chokwe Lumumba. While Lumumba's untimely passing seven months into his administration dented these most recent ambitions of transforming Jackson and the surrounding region, efforts have continued in other forms.

The most significant of these is Cooperation Jackson, a multi-layered plan to support economic democracy in the area, using as a foundation a network of cooperatives and other worker-owned, democratically managed enterprises. Led by members of the community alongside the core group of activists that supported Lumumba's mayoral run, Cooperation Jackson seeks to foster democratic participation and establish a degree of economic independence, in particular for working class Black people, first in Jackson and then expanding through the Kush delta region of western Mississippi.

This current focus on solidarity economy initiatives doesn't mean that today's Mississippi Freedom Fighters have left behind yesterday's dreams. In parallel, activists continue to work to build popular political consciousness among Black and working class people through projects of transformative community service and political education. They also retain the intention to again challenge for power in the electoral sphere.

This publication is the first insider account of the Lumumba Administration. Kali Akuno, the author of this study, served as the coordinator of Special Projects and External Funding for the late Mayor Chokwe Lumumba. He also is the co-founder and director of Cooperation Jackson as well as an organizer with the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement. In this piece, Akuno provides a critical history of the work done in Jackson in recent years, marrying these efforts to a future vision for the Jackson-Kush Plan to transform life in Jackson and beyond. For the target is clear: to turn around the State of Mississippi.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg  
Co-Directors of New York Office, February 2015*

# Casting Shadows

## Chokwe Lumumba and the Struggle for Racial Justice and Economic Democracy in Jackson, Mississippi

By Kali Akuno

In Mississippi, deep down in the heart of “Dixie,” a critical democratic experiment is attempting to challenge the state’s longstanding order of institutional white supremacy and paternalistic capitalism. This experiment is premised on building a radical culture of participatory democratic engagement to gain control over the “authoritative” functions of governance, and to democratize the fundamental means of production, distribution, and financial exchange. It is being led by the New Afrikan People’s Organization and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, which themselves are building on nearly two hundred years of struggle for Afrikan liberation in the territories claimed by the European settler-state of Mississippi. This experiment is called the Jackson-Kush Plan, named after the state’s capital, Jackson, and the eighteen contiguous majority Black counties that border the Mississippi River, or Kush District, as it was called by members of the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika.

The Jackson-Kush Plan has three programmatic focuses intended to build a mass base with the political clarity, organizational capacity, and material self-sufficiency to build autonomous power:

⇒ People’s Assemblies, which will serve as instruments of “dual power” to counter the abusive powers of the state and the economic and social domination of the forces of capital (regional, national, and international).

- ⇒ An Independent Political Force, which will challenge and replace the power of the two parties of transnational capital—i.e., the Democrats and the Republicans—which dominate the arena of electoral politics in Mississippi.
- ⇒ A Solidarity Economy, which will be anchored by a network of cooperatives and supporting institutions to strengthen worker power, worker democracy, and wealth equity in the state.

Our experiment is anchored in the rich history of organizing in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, starting at the beginning of Reconstruction and continuing into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century with the election of longtime community organizer and radical lawyer Chokwe Lumumba as mayor of Jackson. It draws on the practices and lessons of grassroots struggles to build consensual democracy, as exhibited by the autonomous communities led by the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, as well as an economy of associative producers that subordinates capital to labor and is rooted in social solidarity, as shown by Mondragón in Euskadi, also known as the Basque region of the Spanish nation-state.

The fundamental aim of our experiment is to attain power. The power for Afrikan, Indigenous, and other oppressed peoples and exploited classes living on this landmass to control our own lives and determine our own destinies. The power to liberate ourselves from the clutches of the oppressive systems of white supremacy, capitalism, colonialism, and

imperialism that structure social reality in the state of Mississippi.

## **Contextualizing the Initiative**

For most, the potential of our democratic experiment runs counter to the common perceptions about Mississippi, which is better known as a historic standard bearer for the ruthless enslavement of African people. As the demand for cotton grew worldwide in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mississippi became the center of the expanding domestic slave trade. Over one million slaves were transported to the Deep South between 1790 and 1860 (resulting in the popular phrase “being sold down the river,” which referred to the brutal conditions in the Mississippi and Ohio River regions). The growth of “King Cotton” also resulted in the expulsion of the Indigenous population and the marginalization of poor whites in the face of plantation economies. The failure of radical reconstruction to break up the plantation system after the war, along with the creation of “Black codes” to enforce segregation, created a triple “P” effect: the poverty, prisons, and paternalistic white supremacy that have impacted Mississippi ever since.

Paternalist capitalism emerged and deepened in the state in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This form of capitalism is based on the shift in how Black labor was exploited after the Civil War and Reconstruction periods. Following the collapse of the short-lived Reconstruction government in Mississippi, Black workers were primarily confined to becoming sharecroppers—farm laborers working almost exclusively for the large landowners who had been their owners or their owners’ descendants. In many respects, sharecroppers were slaves by another name, wholly dependent on large landowners for wages, food, shelter, and medical care. This system lasted nearly ninety years, from the 1870s until the 1960s. It was gradually weakened by the automation of larger portions of ag-

ricultural production, particularly that of cotton picking. Automation displaced nearly a million Black workers between the late 1940s and the early 1970s, forcing them to migrate to urban areas throughout the United States.

Industrial manufacturing entered Mississippi on a significant scale beginning in the late 1920s. The key manufacturing industries included shipbuilding, timber cutting and processing, transport and shipping, canning and, later, industrial catfish, chicken, and pig farming. Industrial capital exploited the existing racial order and system of super-exploitation to deepen the fragmentation of the multi-national working class and keep it in a subordinate position. Black workers were either relegated to menial positions or grossly undercompensated when they performed skilled labor in the factories. The racial divide was also successfully used to limit the development of working class consciousness and working class organization. Beginning in the late 1890s, regional capital, both agricultural and industrial, was able to build a solid alliance with sectors of the white working class to resist unionization and defeat the legislative gains of the National Labor Relations Act, primarily via the passage of Taft-Hartley and the institutionalization of “right to work” laws that were designed to privilege white workers. The “right to work” regime that governs Mississippi labor relations is the other defining feature of paternalist capitalism that continues to define the social order in the state.

Today Mississippi is the poorest state in the union, with a median household income of \$37,095. The City of Jackson is one of the poorest metropolitan cities in the United States, with a median household income of \$33,434 and a poverty rate of 28.3% between 2008 and 2012. The city’s “official” unemployment rate stood at 8% as of August 2013, according to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics. However, its “real” unemployment rate is estimated to be above 25%. Poverty and

unemployment are only the tip of the iceberg. Mississippi's wealth equity figures are even worse. It is estimated that people of African descent control less than 10% of the vested capital in the state.

Mississippi is also one of the most repressive states in the union. It has the third highest incarceration rate in the United States, with the overwhelming number of those incarcerated being people of African descent. It is also noted for being at or near the bottom of every major quality of life indicator, including health measures, quality housing, transportation, worker rights and protections, and educational access and attainment.

While the oppressive character of Mississippi has historic and current weight, at the same time there is also tremendous potential for radical transformation. It is our argument that Mississippi constitutes a weak link in the U.S. bourgeois-democratic capitalist system. Although capitalism thoroughly dominates social relations in Mississippi, and has done so at least since its inception as a colonial entity in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the local practice of the system can best be described as a "contingent" form of its expression. What makes it contingent is its overt dependency on a paternalistic white supremacy. This dependency restricts and distorts the profit-motive that is central to the capitalist mode of production and tempers it according to the needs of the forces of white supremacy—namely the local capitalist and elite classes—to maintain social and political control over the state, its peoples, and its resources. What this amounts to in practice is a severe re-

striction of the capacity of labor and agricultural and industrial production, trade, and financial flows in and out of the state. Rather than stimulating growth and maximizing profits through increased production and trade, the local white ruling class has prioritized a strategy of containment that deliberately seeks to fetter the Black population by limiting its access to capital and decent wages, both of which constitute a critical source of labor power and strength in a capitalist society. "Money doesn't talk as loud as race in Mississippi," as an old saying goes.

This contingent and paternalist capitalism has produced a number of deep contradictions within the state. Black populations constitute majorities in 16 western counties in Mississippi, resulting in the highest percentage of Black elected officials in the union. However, demographics alone are not the only determining factor. A long memory of white supremacy, together with its present manifestations and representatives, make the majority Black populations in the Kush District acutely aware of their interests and compelled to act upon them on all fronts of social life. It is this combination of favorable demographics, elevated political consciousness, and strong political mobilization that has created the pre-conditions for our political experiment. Add to this the fact that thousands of Blacks are migrating back to Mississippi every year, and that despite all the reactionary and xenophobic initiatives of the Republican Party, a growing immigrant population is driving demographic shifts that promise to make it a majority non-white state over the next twenty years, and you can see why we characterize Mississippi as a weak link in the chain.

## **A Short History of Black Resistance in Mississippi**

People of African descent have a long history of resistance against colonization, enslavement,

exploitation, and white supremacy as they have manifested themselves in the lands that

now comprise the state of Mississippi. One of the earliest acts of resistance was the Natchez Rebellion of 1729, when an alliance of enslaved Africans and Indigenous people from the Natchez Nation rebelled against French colonists. Afterwards, countless enslaved Africans liberated themselves and wound up marooned in the backwoods portion of the territory during its early days as a French and Anglo colonial possession. There were also numerous slave rebellions throughout the antebellum period in Mississippi.

After the Civil War, people of African descent organized independent communities, purchased considerable portions of farm land, started businesses, and ran for and secured a considerable number of political offices in the Reconstruction government. Even after the defeat of Reconstruction and the imposition of the brutal Jim Crow apartheid regime, many Black people continued to try to establish their own communities, purchase farmland to live independently, own their own business enterprises, and exercise the right to vote under the threat of constant terror.

Resistance grew to levels unmatched since Reconstruction in the three decades following World War II. This resistance reached its maximum expression during the 1960s, which witnessed the public rise of Medgar Evers and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as well as the militant campaigns of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and their alliance in the Conference of Federated Organizations (COFO).

In the electoral arena, attempts by Blacks to independently challenge and change our social and political status go back to 1964 and the creation, through COFO, of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The MFDP fa-

mously challenged the Democrat's "Dixiecrat" wing by attempting to seat delegates at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Despite its recent emergence on the scene as an organized force, the MFDP immediately carried significant weight in the Black community, primarily due to the historic struggles waged by Black activists to first gain entry to the party in the mid-1960s, and then to assume majority control in the early 1970s. The construction of an independent political vehicle has ever since been a point of contention, with the principal challenge being how to address the hegemony of "Democratic Tradition" within the Black community.

From these struggles a tradition was born and has been nurtured over forty years. Emerging from this tradition are ongoing efforts both to revitalize the MFDP as well as to build an independent party. The work to revitalize the MFDP is the stronger of the two initiatives, in large part due to its pre-existing infrastructure and credibility. More activists also view it as having greater strategic utility, as it enables work to be distinct from yet still part of the critical Democratic Party primary system in Jackson. Given that Jackson is over 80% Black, and that nearly 99% of the Black community in the city and the state are supporters of the Democratic Party, the Democratic primary constitutes the "real" election in Jackson, and it has served this purpose since at least 1993. For this reason, many activists don't want to jettison the MFDP for something wholly new.

As an attempt to bridge the history of the MFDP with the radical political objectives that emerged out of the New Afrikan Independence Movement, the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika, and the Revolutionary Action Movement/African People's Party—which collectively gave birth to the New Afrikan People's Organization and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement—and in so doing build an independent party and political force, we

decided to support a city council and then mayoral election run by Chokwe Lumumba, a human rights attorney and long-term revolutionary organizer.

Chokwe Lumumba first moved to Mississippi in 1971 to support the attempt of the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika to establish its capital in the state of Mississippi. This effort was brutally suppressed by the United States government in August 1971, and eleven of its leading activists were taken prisoners. Chokwe became a lawyer in large part to defend and free these organizers, who became known nationally and internationally as the RNA-11. After spending some years in Detroit and New York City during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Chokwe Lumumba returned to Mississippi to build the New Afrikan People's Organization and advance the development of a mass movement through the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, which was founded in Jackson in 1990.

Decades of organizing, base building, and forging strategic alliances with a variety of forces in the city and state enabled us to start seriously considering Chokwe for political office in the mid-2000s. The catalyst for this consideration was our analysis of the weakening of the power of Black people in the Gulf Coast region (and nationally) following the devastation and displacement wrought by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. After careful deliberation, our organizations devised the Jackson-Kush Plan and organized Chokwe to run for city council in the fall of 2008. In the spring of 2009, we were able to elect Chokwe Lumumba to the Jackson City Council representing Ward 2 (followed by the successful election of Hinds County's first Black sheriff, Tyrone Lewis, in 2011). And in June 2013, after nearly ten years of work, we were able to make Chokwe Lumumba the mayor of Jackson, Mississippi.

Unfortunately, the Lumumba Administration lasted only a little over seven months. How-

ever, the short administration's legacy is many-fold. It includes the passage of a 1% sales tax to raise revenues to fix the city's crumbling infrastructure and keep its water system from being either regionalized—which would dilute Black political control—or privatized to maximize the exploitation of a common good. It also includes the publication of the Jackson Rising Policy Statement, a sweeping series of public policy recommendations based on the People's Platform that had brought Lumumba to power. And finally, the administration's legacy includes the introduction of participatory democratic practices into municipal government.

It did this in a number of ways, first by allowing the city council to engage in all departmental planning sessions and participate directly in budgeting sessions, and by having weekly one-on-one meetings with each of the seven council members. The Lumumba Administration also turned all major policy questions and decisions into "mass questions" and "mass engagements." On two major occasions the administration organized processes for the general public to decide on major issues, both as an attempt to elicit mass support as well as to build a public culture of participatory engagement as part of the political project of "democratizing American democracy." The mass question and engagement approach also served as a means of shifting the balance of political power towards the Black working class. The more the class was engaged in exercising decision-making power, the more it eliminated the practice of governance as an elite affair ruled by technocrats and the servants of capital. All of these practices were gaining momentum at the time of Chokwe's death in February 2014.

All of these practices were new to the city, and they have all subsequently been jettisoned by the new administration in an attempt to restore status quo power relations in the city.

## Developing the Jackson Plan

The Jackson Plan was key to the rise of Mayor Lumumba, but electoral work is only one aspect—albeit the most advanced—of what it represents. Originally crafted by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, the Jackson Plan is an initiative for economic, political, and cultural self-determination. It emerged out of the 2005 Jackson People’s Assembly, which in turn was a response to the crisis of displacement and disenfranchisement that emerged in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The idea was to first build a solid base in Jackson—the state capital and largest city as well as the center of commerce and mass media in Mississippi—which would then enable us to more successfully branch out to the Kush and support allied forces there (hence the more ambitiously named “Jackson-Kush Plan”).

There are four interlocking components of the Jackson Plan: 1) Building the People’s Assembly; 2) Pursuing Political Office and Creating an Independent Political Vehicle; 3) Building Cooperatives; 4) Training a New Generation of Organizers. Tremendous strides have been made to advance each of these initiatives. However, they have not all developed evenly or at the same pace. As already discussed above, the pursuit of political office is the initiative that has thus far advanced the furthest.

However, this pursuit would not have been possible without having first built up the People’s Assembly. Indeed, the greatest challenge to the Assembly and its expansion has been the almost non-stop run of electoral campaigns our movement has engaged in since 2009. For considerable periods, significant sections of the Assembly’s base have served as the organizing force driving the electoral campaigns. At times this has challenged the standard operations of the Assembly and at certain

junctions even created tensions regarding its proper role. On more than one occasion the strategic question has been raised: Is the Assembly primarily designed to build “dual power,” or is it rather a vehicle meant to nurture and support progressive political candidates? The affirmative answer from the vast majority of the Assembly’s base is that it must be a vehicle to exercise political power outside of elected office. However, the challenge to have it act in a manner that is contrary to the hegemonic sway of electoral politics is a constant struggle. We will explore the People’s Assembly and its praxis in more detail below.

Particularly over the last year, with the launch of Cooperation Jackson, the effort to build cooperatives has become the major focus of the Jackson Plan. The intention of Cooperation Jackson is to develop a solidarity economy that can, in turn, further the broader struggle for economic democracy through community development and community ownership. Cooperation Jackson is working to develop a cooperative network that will consist of four interconnected and interdependent institutions: an emerging federation of local worker cooperatives, a cooperative incubator, an education and training center (the Lumumba Center for Economic Democracy and Development), and a cooperative bank.

Finally, since 2009 our broad efforts have facilitated the development of scores of new organizers and activists, both young and old. This component of the Jackson Plan has mostly been interwoven through the other areas of our work. Perhaps for this reason, our plans to train and develop these new organizers have not always been as systematic or intentional as we would have liked. Securing adequate resources to develop a school and training program, which we call the Amandla Project, has been a challenge

and a major reason why we have not been as successful in this arena as we intended. Capacity has also been a major challenge. Many of the organizers who have the experience, training, and skill to serve as dynamic educators and trainers have had to bottom-line other critical areas of work on our agenda, and more often than not these initiatives have taken priority.

After the passing of Mayor Lumumba, the Jackson People's Assembly and the organic leadership of the Jackson-Kush Plan determined that being intentional about the development of new cadres should be made a higher priority. The rationale was that, since Chokwe's experience and skill as a leader could not be replicated, we would have to "raise hundreds of new Chokwe's" to not only sustain but advance the initiative beyond our expectations and dreams. The operationalization of this priority is now being met by the development of a series of organizing trainings that will be conducted at the Chokwe Lumumba Center for Economic Democracy and Development and coordinated by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, the MS Workers Center for Human Rights, the Mississippi Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, and MS One Voice.

### **Building and Sustaining the People's Assembly**

The underlying key to this whole experiment is to build a social movement that can successfully exploit the favorable socio-material conditions in Jackson and throughout the Kush District, with the goal of catalyzing the main social forces to transform the oppressive and exploitative social relations that define the current social order.

The vehicle most critical to this transformative process, since the beginning, has been the People's Assembly. The People's Assembly is a form of democratic social organization that

allows the people of Jackson to exercise their agency, exert their power, and practice democracy—by which we mean "the rule of the people, for the people, by the people"—in its broadest terms, entailing making direct decisions about the economic, social, and cultural operations of our community, and not just the contractual ("civil") or electoral and legislative aspects of the social order (i.e., the limited realm of what is generally deemed to be "political"). The New Afrikan People's Organization and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement started organizing assemblies in the late 1980s to allow Black people to exercise self-determination and exert their power.

Beyond the definition provided above, a people's assembly is first and foremost a mass gathering of people organized and assembled to address essential social issues and/or questions pertinent to a community. "Mass" can be defined in numerous ways depending on one's views and position, but per our experiences we define it as a body that engages at least one-fifth of the total population in a defined geographic area (neighborhood, ward or district, city, state, etc.). We have arrived at this one-fifth formula based on nearly 20 years' experience of what it takes to amass sufficient numbers, social force, and capacity to effectively implement the decisions made by the Assembly and ensure that these actions achieve their desired outcomes. "Addressing essential social issues" means developing solutions, strategies, action plans, and timelines to change various socio-economic conditions in a desired manner, not just hearing and/or giving voice to the people assembled.

The Jackson People's Assembly calls for and is based upon a "one person, one vote" principle. We emphasize that agency must be directly vested in individuals, regardless of whether the Assembly makes decisions through a voting process or some form of consensus. This aspect of direct engagement, direct democracy, and individual empowerment is what sep-

arates a people's assembly from other types of mass gatherings or formations such as alliances or united fronts, in which a multitude of social forces are engaged.

At present, the Jackson People's Assembly operates at a mid-point between a constituent and a mass assembly. A constituent assembly is a representative body, not a direct democratic body of the people in their totality. This type of assembly is dependent on mass outreach, but it is structured, intentionally or unintentionally, to accommodate the material (having to work, deal with childcare, etc.) and social limitations (interest, access to information, political and ideological differences, etc.) of the people. Our experience teaches us that the challenge with this type of assembly is that it tends to become overly bureaucratic and stagnant over time if it doesn't continue to work to bring in new people (particularly youth), and if it is unable to maintain the struggle to be mass in its character.

A mass assembly is the purer example of a people's democracy. It normally emerges during times of acute crisis, when there are profound ruptures in society. These types of assemblies are typically all-consuming, short-lived entities. Their greatest weakness is that they typically demand those engaged to give all of their time and energy to the engagement of the crisis, which over time is not sustainable, as people eventually have to tend to their daily needs in order to sustain themselves.

As noted, the Jackson People's Assembly principally operates as a constituent assembly, engaging in a number of strategic campaigns, from defending the 1% sales tax increase that was voted in by Jackson residents in January 2014, to initiatives that provide support for Cooperation Jackson to address the material needs of our social base and to elevate its economic power. This is based primarily on the material limitations imposed on the base and the coordinating body of the Assembly, the Peo-

ple's Task Force, by the daily grinds (i.e., tending to work, child care, health, and transportation challenges, etc.). There have also been political challenges confronted over the past several years. The most significant challenge was adjusting to the mayoral term of Chokwe Lumumba and how to relate to the office and the city government. Then there was the challenge of how to address the sudden loss of Mayor Lumumba and the counter-reaction to the people's movement that facilitated the election of Mayor Tony Yarber in April 2014.

However, during times of crisis the Assembly tends to take on more of a mass character, such as following the passing of Mayor Lumumba in late February 2014 to defend the People's Platform (which was devised by the Assembly) and many of the initiatives the Lumumba administration was pursuing to fulfill it. It should be noted, however, that even though the current practice in Jackson tends towards the constituent model, the aim is to grow into a permanent mass assembly.

More broadly, our Assembly has two broad functions and means of exercising power. The first is to *organize "autonomous," self-organized and executed social projects*. Autonomous in this context means initiatives not supported or organized by the government (state) or some variant of monopoly capital (finance, corporate, industrial, or mercantile). These types of projects range from organizing community gardens to forming people's self-defense campaigns; from housing occupations to forming workers unions to building worker cooperatives. On a basic scale these projects function as serve-the-people survival programs that help our community to sustain itself and acquire a degree of self-reliance. On a larger scale these projects provide enough resources and social leverage (such as flexible time to organize) to allow people to engage in essential fight-back or offensive (typically positional) initiatives.

The second means of exercising power is to *apply pressure on the government and the forces of economic exploitation in society*. We exert pressure by organizing various types of campaigns against these forces, including mass action (protest) campaigns, direct action campaigns, boycotts, non-compliance campaigns, and policy shift campaigns (either advocating for or against existing laws or proposed or pending legislation).

In order to carry out these critical functions, the Assembly must organize its proceedings to produce clear demands, a coherent strategy, realistic action plans, and concrete timelines. It must also organize itself into units of implementation, committee's or action groups, to carry out the various assignments dictated by the strategy and action plans.

When considering these functions and how they are executed in Jackson, it is critical to note that our model makes clear distinctions between the Assembly as an "event," the Assembly as a "process," and the Assembly as an "institution." As an event, the Assembly is where we take up general questions and issues, and deliberate and decide on what can, should, and will be done to address them. As a process, the Assembly is where the more detailed questions of strategy, planning, and setting concrete timelines, measurable goals, and deliverables are refined, to then be carried out through the People's Task Force and the various committees and working groups of the Assembly. As an institution, the Assembly is a product of the combined social weight of its events, processes, actions, and social outcomes.

Although the authority of the Assembly is expressed to its highest extent during mass "events," the real work of the Assembly, which enables it to exercise its power, is carried out through its organizing bodies and processes. The People's Task Force, together with various committees and working groups, make up the primary organizing bodies of the Assembly. These bodies execute the "work" of the Assembly—including outreach, networking, fundraising, communications, intelligence gathering, trainings, and campaigning. In this model, the People's Task Force serves as the principal coordinating committee; it is directly elected by the Assembly, serves at its will, and is subject to immediate recall with due process.

Committees are standing, meaning they are regularly constituted bodies designed to deal with certain functions and/or operations of the Assembly. The basics include: Outreach and Mobilization; Media and Communications; Fundraising and Finance; and Security. Working groups tend to be campaign or project-oriented bodies. They emerge and exist to accomplish certain time-delimited goals and objectives. Examples drawn from our experience include working groups that successfully campaigned for the release of the Scott Sisters, forced the federal government to provide more housing aid to internally displaced persons from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina, and organized public transportation workers in alliance with the Assembly to save JTRAN (Jackson's Public Transportation) and provide its workers with higher wages. All committees and working groups operate on a volunteer principle, and they tend to be formed on a self-selecting basis.

## **Engaging Power: the Administration of Mayor Chokwe Lumumba**

To date, the most critical experience we have accumulated in the realm of engaging power

has been during the brief administration of the late Mayor Chokwe Lumumba, which last-

ed just over seven months, from July 1, 2013, to February 25, 2014, when he passed away. Although we were only able to move a mere fraction of our electoral agenda during that time, we did gain a tremendous amount of experience about how to better “engage state power.”

We say “engaging state power,” rather than “wielding state power,” for two reasons. The first is that the capitalist and imperialist nature of the constitutional framework that defines the U.S. government as an institution limits the agency of any individual office holder at every level of government. We have tried to drive this point home to the broader movement time and time again by saying, “it should be clear that, at best, we won an election (referring to Chokwe Lumumba’s mayoral victory), a popularity contest. We did not win the ability to control the government, just the temporary ability to influence its tactical affairs on a municipal level.”

Secondly, as an organization that is part of a radical movement whose strategic aim is the decolonization of the southeastern portion of the United States, pursuing an elected office within the U.S. government has been viewed by many of our historic allies as a means of legitimizing the powers-that-be. In remaining consistent with the pursuit of self-determination and national liberation, our campaigns for any elected office within the U.S. constitutional framework are conducted on a case-by-case basis and assessed on the potentiality of the campaign’s and/or office’s ability to either create more democratic space or advance policy pursuits that test the limits of structural change.

Given these limitations, it should be noted that as “temporal” engagements, our electoral initiatives have been attempts to bring to light various social contradictions by making every critical issue a mass issue, and in so doing asking the people to demand structural solutions,

or what many call “transitional demands,” which attempt to address the contradictions at their root. Doing this is easier said than done. But under the leadership of the New Afrikan People’s Organization and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, we have been able to move consistently in this direction by engaging in three key strategies in our electoral work.

### *1. Mass Education*

The key to our ability to make transitional demands on a consistent basis is to constantly engage in mass education work that makes direct causal and structural links to national and international issues and how they are connected to local issues and realities. Making links to national and international issues is vital, as it demonstrates that the issues confronted by the people of Jackson are systemic, and not just isolated local incidents. This understanding that our local issues are expressions of systemic issues makes raising transitional demands much easier. The instruments central to the success of our mass education work are the radio, a print news bulletin, editorials in local allied newspapers and weekly’s, and social media. The People’s Assembly is also utilized as a vehicle of mass education. However, it should be noted that it has taken nearly two decades of consistent mass education work to build the level and depth of social consciousness that exists presently in Jackson.

### *2. Preparatory Battles*

One of the keys of our electoral success has been transferring victories from the social justice struggles to the electoral arena, and this requires picking key pre-electoral fights that highlight the essential essence of our political platform and distinguish us from other candidates and political forces. We call these preparatory battles. There are two key battles that we can highlight from the period between 2009 and 2013 when Chokwe Lumum-

ba served as a city councilman. The first issue was fighting to save Jackson's public transportation system and to expand its services and increase the wages of its workers. This was not only a fight against neoliberal austerity but a battle to address an ongoing structural weakness in Jackson that served a broader public good. Jackson, like a lot of mid-sized Southern cities, has an inadequate public transportation system. Most people have to own their own vehicles to get around, and in a city with high concentrations of poverty, transportation costs can be exorbitant for an average worker making minimum or barely above minimum wage. This struggle also aided the elderly, who constitute a high percentage of the population, and the disabled. This approach, of fighting a proposed cut of a public good with a proposed expansion of it, resonated with broad sectors of the working class and highlighted key material differences in our approach and concerns.

The second issue was the passage of an ordinance against racial profiling. This ordinance was intentionally designed to address two related issues: the proposed adoption of policing strategies that would further criminalize and imprison Black people; and other xenophobic measures that were being proposed on a municipal and state level to detain and deport undocumented immigrants. The measure forced a conversation about the repressive nature of the state, the need for "Black and Brown Unity," and common unity of various communities in fighting the forces of white supremacy in the surrounding counties and the state. The measure passed because of how it was framed, galvanized working and professional sectors in the Black, white, Latino, and immigrant communities, and demonstrated that they had common interests and common enemies. From our vantage point, these preparatory battles must not only help bring together and build broad sectors of the community, but must also have the ability to educate, as well as instruct and/or prepare the masses for fu-

ture struggles. By educate we mean raise the awareness and consciousness of the people. By instruct/prepare we mean that the battles to advance these measures must build the capacity and organizational strength of the people to engage in further fights and become transformative agents.

### *3. Operational Fronts*

Since the early 1990s, with the emergence of the first formulation of the Jackson People's Assembly, the New Afrikan People's Organization has been keen on building alliances and coalitions that are as operational as they are political. Operational here means that each organization in the front plays a designated role, and not just in the coalition but in the broader arena of social struggle against white supremacy, economic exploitation, and state violence. Building an alliance or front in this manner helps to avoid unproductive competition within the movement and advance a division of labor that builds interdependent and vested relationships. It has also enabled us to develop long-term and deep political commitments to move beyond "least common denominator" platforms that are typical of alliances. The People's Platform, which was developed in 2009 under the leadership of the People's Assembly and adopted by all of the strategic allies in our various operational fronts, is the clearest expression of the depth of these relationships.

A key to our Operational Fronts approach, which has further enabled us to pursue the mass-question approach of making transitional demands, has been the construction of three different but fundamentally inter-related bodies: the Popular Front, the United Front, and the National Liberation Front. We conceive of the Popular Front as a big tent in the fight against white supremacy, fascist aggression, and other forms of economic and social reaction. It is intentionally constructed as a multi-class and multi-national (or racial) front that seeks to

address all of the aforementioned issues on the basis of the highest level of unity possible. Meanwhile, the purpose of the United Front is to build and maintain strategic fields of engagement with various social forces with bases in the working class and involved in explicit working-class struggles for jobs, higher wages, better working conditions, and to counter the policies and strategies of mass repression and incarceration employed to subjugate the working class. It is critical to note that in Mississippi most of these social forces are not unions or worker centers, although both are represented in the front, but rather churches and community organizations. Finally, the National Liberation Front is a multi-class front of New African or Black forces focusing on the broad and multi-faceted struggle for self-determination for people of African descent.

## **Policies Pursued and Lessons Learned**

In terms of policy, in assuming that we would occupy the mayoral office for one term at the very least, we prioritized the pursuit of instituting transformative policies, as we deemed their impact would be the most enduring and enabling legacy of our administrative term. During this term, we aimed to accomplish the passage and institutionalization of the following:

1. Make Jackson a sustainable city centered on the production and use of renewable energy sources and “zero waste” production and consumption methods.
2. Support cooperatives and cooperative development in the city, including but not limited to the creation of a cooperative incubator in the city’s department of planning and development and the creation of a cooperative start-up loan fund.
3. Mandate strict local hiring policies for city contract awards to insure greater equity.
4. Enforce strong community benefit agreements and reinvestment requirements for corporations, commercial retailers, and developers wanting to do business in Jackson.
5. Expand and modernize public transportation systems in the city, including the support for rail projects and renewable energy fleets.
6. Expand public health services, particularly guaranteeing access for residents to join the programs of the Affordable Care Act (which has largely been rejected by the state government since its inception).
7. Expand the democratic scope of public education, particularly changing policy to make school board positions elected rather than appointed by the mayor.
8. Create strong community oversight of the police through a control board with the power to subpoena, indict and fire officers for misconduct or human rights violations. Directly related to this, we also sought to implement policies that de-criminalized marijuana possession and use to end one aspect of the “war on drugs,” which has largely served as a war on the Black working class and produced the largest carceral state on earth.
9. Create policies to institutionalize participatory budgeting, so as to be fully transparent, better allocate resources, and deepen democracy on a significant scale.
10. Institutionalize a Human Rights Charter and Human Rights Commission to require the city to abide by international norms and standards of conduct and policy outcomes.

All of these policies sought to institutionalize certain aspects of the People’s Platform. The aim of pursuing them was to create a more sustainable city and more democratic space in the municipality, to strengthen the organization of the working class, to transform relations of production, and to stop gentrification

and displacement. We believed that it was going to be possible to pass this entire legislative agenda because of the strength and momentum of the People's Assembly and the social forces it represented, together with the overall balance of power on the city council and between the council and a mayor propelled by a social movement.<sup>1</sup>

Our administration's main constraint, which ultimately occupied much of our time in office, was a threatening consent decree forced on the city by the Environmental Protection Agency in late 2012 to address its water quality issues. Jackson has some of the worst water quality of any midsize city in the country. The problem is Jackson's antiquated water delivery system. Most of the pipes in the "historic section" of Jackson (built before the early 1960s) are made of copper and lead and are over 100 years old. This decree stipulates that the city has 17 years (from 2012), with strict intermittent timelines of three, five, and ten years, to complete an entire overhaul of the water delivery system or face severe penalties and the possibility of losing control over the ownership and management of the system. It was estimated in 2013 that the overall cost of this overhaul would be at least \$1 billion.

The question this threat posed to our administration was, first, how to generate the revenue to cover this expense and retain control of the water system, and second, how to do it with-

out sacrificing other standard expenditures and critical programs, policies, and our overall agenda. The truth is that we did not have an adequate answer to these questions. The population at large and our social base particularly were adamant about not losing control over the system. But the administration was divided on how to save it and how to generate the resources to do so, as were our allies and the social base itself. Trying to solve this riddle absorbed the overwhelming majority of the Lumumba Administration's brief time and energy in office, in part because the threat was escalated by members of the Tea Party in the state legislature who introduced an emergency management bill modeled on a Michigan law that would have allowed the state to take over troubled municipalities.

Our lack of clarity and differences of opinion on these issues, coupled with our general inexperience in governing, resulted in our administration enacting a set of contradictory policies to address the issue. One set of policy decisions resulted in raised water rates, while another led to a 1% sales tax raise. It also compelled a faction of our administration to pursue and engage forces outside of our standard theory and framework of practice in alliance building, be it tactical or strategic. Some members of our administration started to appeal to and entertain advice and offers from transnational corporate engineering firms, on the advice of Frank Biden (brother of Vice President Joe Biden) and the Blue Green Consultant Group, to both repair and finance our Consent Decree operations. The reasoning for this deviation was to explore creative ways to finance the water systems overhaul to retain the city's control over it.

The end result of this confusion was that our policies and actions alienated a critical portion of our base, particularly the elderly on fixed incomes, for whom the water rate increases created a degree of hardship without sufficient explanation or significant enough relief. This

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<sup>1</sup> Jackson has seven electoral wards and seven city councilpersons. During the administration of Chokwe Lumumba there were five Black and two white councilpersons. Four of the Black councilpersons were solidly aligned with the administration, and the fifth generally fell in line to not look obstructionist or overly hostile and oppositional. One white councilperson was a member of the Democratic Party and viewed as liberal within the Jackson context. She supported our agenda and voted in favor of it as long as it didn't overtly threaten the power and privileges of developers, who were key to her electoral success. The other white councilperson typically voted against anything we proposed on ideological grounds, as he was affiliated with the Tea Party faction of the Republican Party.

confusion and alienation proved to be costly for Chokwe Antar Lumumba's subsequent mayoral run in early 2014 after his father's untimely death.

On the whole, we learned some hard lessons during our brief seven months in office. The most critical lesson we learned is that our practice has to be as sound as our theory. While in office, our practice of governance did not always equate to our previous work of building an alternate base of political power rooted in a democratic mass movement. Capacity was our most critical challenge in this regard. Key members in the administration, who had been crucial to building the mass base of our democratic experiment, often did not have the capacity to fully participate in the People's Assembly or in other areas of the mass work, as they were preoccupied with learning their new positions and the limits it entailed.

Another key lesson we learned is that even a relatively well-organized and mobilized mass movement is seriously constrained by the structural limits of capitalism, particularly in its neoliberal form. Our movement was not fully prepared, nor strong enough, to directly confront the forces of capital so as to address our structural issue around the city's water management. The vast majority of our base cringed at the notion of taxing corporations and the wealthy to pay for the system's redevelopment, primarily out of fear of driving off what little industrial and commercial base of employers remaining in the city. The movement settled instead for a piecemeal solution in the form of the 1% sales tax, which has and will increase the coffers of city government, but will not provide nearly enough to pay for the full extent of the overhaul. This taught us the extent to which we still have to go to educate our base, strengthen the overall capacity of the movement, and avoid the many pitfalls of neo-colonialism that are centered in unprincipled alliances amongst oppressed peoples

and between the leaders of the oppressed and the forces of the oppressor.

### **The Chokwe Antar Lumumba Mayoral Campaign**

Just as we were beginning to get a grip on the governance process and starting to move our policy agenda through the city council, Mayor Lumumba suddenly died. Following the protocols of the city's charter, the city council appointed an interim mayor and scheduled a special election for the mayor's seat. The special election was called for mid-April 2014, barely a month and a half after his death.

In order to continue advancing our agenda, the base of our movement compelled Chokwe Antar to run for mayor. However, the movement did not have enough time to really reflect on the lessons learned from Mayor Lumumba's term, let alone collectively internalize them to refine its practice. As a result, the movement did not adequately address all of the contradictions that had developed during the Lumumba Administration and led to the demobilization of a critical part of our base. Although Chokwe Antar made it to the run-off round of the special election, and actually won a solid majority of Black voters (officially 67%), he lost the election to City Councilperson Tony Yarber by nearly 2,500 votes. In a city that is nearly 80% Black, facts generally dictate that the person who wins the Black majority vote wins the elections. The 2014 Special Election was an exceptional case, in that now-Mayor Tony Yarber only won 32% of the Black vote but secured an overwhelming 90% of the city's white minority vote, which turned out at a record-breaking rate of 75%.

Although the historic white voter turnout was crucial, the decisive factor was actually the low Black voter turnout during this special election. The base did not turn out, plain and simple.

They sent us a clear message, and we are now in the process of internalizing these lessons so we can continue to advance our critical experiment.

This failed campaign to elect Chokwe Antar Lumumba sharpened the focus of several lessons from the Lumumba Administration that we had not yet had the time to fully internalize, namely that:

1. The process of mass education and instructional struggle is more important than holding office. During our brief period in office, we believed that the act of governing was just as important as mass education. We now believe decisively that mass education and instructional struggle must be primary. We have to constantly engage the base on all critical questions throughout the entire process of any decision so that they understand all of the choices and their implications to make sound and agreed upon collective decisions.
2. The United Front and the National Liberation Front should take precedence over the Popular Front. During the latter part of the Lumumba Administration and Chokwe Antar's campaign we over-emphasized appeals to the Popular Front, to the detriment of the United Front and the National Liberation Front, so as to pass legislative initiatives like the 1% sales tax. This over-emphasis produced friction within the United Front, as many workers felt that we were privileging petit bourgeois inter-

ests and concerns over the concrete needs of the working class. This contributed to the demobilization experienced during the April 2014 Special Election.

3. We need to focus on building new operational fronts. We are now recalculating and rebuilding our alliances in the wake of the new conditions and regional alliances that have been created by the forces of capital in response to our success in 2013. The main issue is how to build a new, more reliable Popular Front in light of capital's clear aim to split our previously existing alliances over questions of economic development.

In light of our mixed experiences engaging state power, we are now focusing on internalizing and assimilating all of the lessons learned over the past two years to: A) rebuild and revitalize the People's Assembly, and; B) engage in concentrated work on the front of economic transformation via cooperative development in the form of Cooperation Jackson. This is to better prepare us for the next round of mayoral and city council elections in 2017, when we intend to again run Chokwe Antar Lumumba for mayor, together with several other candidates determined by the People's Assembly for council seats.

However, it should be noted that we have prioritized building Cooperation Jackson during this next period to strengthen the organization of the working class, expand production in our city and region, and build a more coherent movement for economic democracy.

## **Cooperation Jackson and the Struggle to Create Economic Democracy**

Cooperation Jackson is an emerging vehicle for sustainable community development, economic democracy, and community ownership. Co-

operation Jackson is working to develop a cooperative network based in Jackson, Mississippi, which will consist of four interconnected and

interdependent institutions: an emerging federation of local worker cooperatives, a developing cooperative incubator, a cooperative education and training center (the Lumumba Center for Economic Democracy and Development), and a cooperative bank or financial institution.

The broad mission of Cooperation Jackson is to advance the development of economic democracy in the city through building a solidarity economy anchored by a network of cooperatives and other types of worker-owned and democratically self-managed enterprises.

Economic democracy provides economic empowerment for all workers, distributors, suppliers, consumers, communities, and the general public by promoting universal access to common resources and democratizing the ownership of the means of production as well as the essential processes of production and distribution through worker self-management and sustainable consumption.

Solidarity economy includes a wide array of economic practices and initiatives that share common values—cooperation and sharing, social responsibility, sustainability, equity and justice. Instead of enforcing a culture of cutthroat competition, it builds cultures and communities of cooperation. Our purpose is to create:

1. A network of interconnected and interlinked cooperatives and worker-owned enterprises that will expand economic opportunity, promote sustainability and build community wealth by creating jobs with dignity, stability, living wages, and quality benefits.
2. A foundation for the revitalization of working-class communities based on stable employment, wealth equity, and sustainable means of production and distribution.
3. An institutional vehicle to promote broad public understanding of economic democ-

racy, the foundations of solidarity economics, and the principles of cooperatives and how worker-owned and self-managed enterprises benefit workers, their families, and their communities.

4. An institutional vehicle to educate and train working people to successfully start, finance, own, democratically operate, and self-manage a sustainable cooperative enterprise.
5. A model that will encourage and enable workers in other cities and municipalities in Mississippi, the South, and throughout the United States to implement their own initiatives to promote economic democracy, solidarity economics, and cooperative development.

Cooperative businesses are unique from other types of commercial enterprises in that they exist to meet the needs of people, not to maximize profits. They are often formed as a way to address the unmet needs of working people—be they producers, workers, consumers, or purchasers—and to provide them with the goods, services, cultural engagement, democratic rights, and political autonomy needed to live fully empowered lives. Cooperatives put capital in the service of working people, rather than making working people subservient to capital. They do this, in their various forms, by:

- ⇒ Democratizing the processes of production, distribution, and consumption;
- ⇒ Equitably distributing the surpluses produced or exchanged;
- ⇒ Creating economies of scale;
- ⇒ Increasing bargaining power;
- ⇒ Sharing costs for new technology;
- ⇒ Gaining access to new markets;
- ⇒ Reducing individual market risks;
- ⇒ Creating and obtaining new services;
- ⇒ Purchasing in bulk to achieve lower prices;
- ⇒ Providing credit under reasonable terms.

Cooperatives and other forms of worker-owned enterprises or community collectives have a long history in Mississippi, particularly within the Afrikan community as an institutional part of the struggle for self-determination, economic justice, and democratic rights. Cooperation Jackson draws deeply from this history of struggle and the well of inspiration and knowledge it produced. We draw on the inspiration provided by democratic leaders like Fannie Lou Hamer and her work to build the Freedom Farm Cooperative. We are also deeply inspired by the history and work of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund. This Federation, amongst others, laid the foundations for the broader initiative to build a dynamic cooperative and democratic economy in Jackson.

Building on these foundations, Cooperation Jackson is seeking to accomplish a major breakthrough for the cooperative movement in the South by becoming the first major network of predominately worker cooperatives to be established in an urban area. While it will undoubtedly take years, if not decades, for Cooperation Jackson to consolidate itself and grow to scale, we believe we possess the potential to become the Mondragón or Emilia-Romagna of the United States, and in the process to transform the lives of working-class Jacksonians.

The question thus arises: How can we address these systemic and structural problems? How can we take proactive, self-determined action to meet our needs and improve the lives of Jacksonians? Cooperation Jackson believes that the core answer is a long-term strategy of coordinated social action led by working people to create economic democracy and a solidarity economy via the development of cooperative enterprises specializing in sustainable means of production and distribution.

The multinational corporations that dominate the regional, national, and international econo-

my are only interested in short-term gains and maximizing profits, not in producing quality high-paying jobs for working people. If we are going to secure the jobs and resources needed to live with the full complement of our human rights, we believe we must do two things: first, create cooperative economic enterprises and institutions that serve our own needs and interests; and second, create and/or support social movements struggling for economic justice and democracy against the narrow interests of multinational corporations and the increasingly ineffective and unsustainable policies of the national governments that define our modern world.

### **Cooperation Jackson's Sustainable Communities Initiative**

Cooperation Jackson's primary initiative is the Sustainable Communities Initiative, or SCI. SCI is a place-based strategy intended to transform a neighborhood in West Jackson by creating an Eco-Village, which will ultimately provide cooperative housing that is permanently affordable as well as operational space for several cooperative enterprises and institutions to create a mutually reinforcing and self-sustaining market ecosystem, supply chain, and network of associated producers or worker-owners. The Eco-Village will be protected by a community land trust (CLT), a nonprofit corporation that develops and stewards affordable housing, community gardens, civic buildings, commercial spaces and other community assets on behalf of a community.

West Jackson is the working-class gateway to Downtown Jackson, which is the heart of the state government of Mississippi. Over the past 30 plus years, West Jackson has suffered from rapid capital flight and divestment, driven in large part by white flight. Since the late 1970s West Jackson has become a Black working-class community, with high concentrations of pover-

ty. Since the late 1980s large parts of West Jackson have become dilapidated and abandoned. It is now estimated that there are over 1,832 vacant lots and 832 abandoned structures out of a total of 6,748 lots in the community, with approximately 41% of total parcels in the community unused. The community has an estimated 13,890 people, of which 92% are Black.

Four major real estate and economic initiatives developing adjacent to West Jackson are driving speculative pressures on the community and confronting it with the threat of gentrification and race and class-based displacement. The four development initiatives are the Medical Corridor (driven by the University of Mississippi and funded by the state government), the One Lake Redevelopment initiative (driven by Greater Jackson Chamber of Commerce and proposed in “Plan 2022”), the development of a new sports stadium for Jackson State University athletics (driven by the destruction of the old stadium in the previously stated Medical Corridor development area), and downtown real estate speculation fueled by various petrochemical companies seeking to expand their lobbying and business operations in the state capital. Each initiative is in a different stage of development, but all have dedicated and committed funding streams and widespread support amongst local elites.

The primary force compelling this speculation is the Medical Corridor. Its expansion provides the economic conditions that enable and drive the other developments. Over the course of the next decade, the corridor’s expansion will provide hundreds of short-term construction jobs and thousands of long-term jobs in the medical and medical support fields. All of these new doctors, nurses, technicians and other support and spin-off workers will need places to live. Many will want to avoid long suburban commutes and have easy access to various living amenities and opportunities for entertainment. Knowing these needs and

anticipating the long-term profits that can be drawn from them, speculators and developers are rapidly moving in on West Jackson due to its strategic location, accessibility, and cheap real estate values.

None of these elite-driven developments are designed to incorporate the existing population living in West Jackson. This is where Cooperation Jackson and the Sustainable Communities Initiative come into the picture. Cooperation Jackson is not averse to economic development, of which West Jackson, and many other Black working-class communities throughout the city are in desperate need. However, Cooperation Jackson is committed to sustainable, community driven and controlled development without displacement. We firmly believe that the existing community must equitably benefit from the new developments that are being planned, and that the community should be able to self-determine and execute its own community revitalization and wealth building initiatives. The Sustainable Communities Initiative is one of the few bottom-up development initiatives in Jackson. The initiative is being driven by the membership of Cooperation Jackson through extensive community outreach, but its foundations were laid by the long-standing organizing efforts of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and the Jackson People’s Assembly. The Sustainable Communities Initiative’s success will mitigate the displacement of the Black community of West Jackson and create an array of eco-friendly and worker and community-owned cooperative businesses and institutions that will be accessible to the long-standing and potentially also new residents of West Jackson. We will accomplish the aforementioned outcomes by establishing the following institutions:

1. *Community Land Trust (CLT)*. Cooperation Jackson will purchase a number of vacant lots, abandoned homes, and commercial

facilities primarily in West Jackson and currently owned by the State of Mississippi, the City of Jackson, and private owners, and organize them into a community land trust. The purpose of holding them in a trust is to ensure that they are removed from the speculative market and dedicated for sustainable communal endeavors.

2. *Community Development Corporation (CDC).* Cooperation Jackson will create a community development corporation to help develop new low-income housing to sustain working-class communities and affordable commercial facilities to support the development of cooperative enterprises in Jackson.
3. *Housing Co-operative.* Cooperation Jackson will turn a significant portion of the land and properties acquired and held by the CLT into an “Eco-Village” housing cooperative. The housing cooperative will provide quality affordable housing and stable rents to help sustain and build vibrant working-class communities in Jackson. It will also create a significant degree of its own energy and waste management infrastructure to ensure that it can more effectively and efficiently utilize alternative sources of energy and eliminate waste by creating a comprehensive “zero-waste” recycling program.

The Eco-Village is in the heart of the “gateway” section of West Jackson. This community is situated in Municipal Ward 3 and is populated by an estimated eight thousand people, the overwhelming majority of whom are Black working class people. The community is almost exclusively a bedroom community, with few employment opportunities at present. The largest employers in the community are Jackson State University and Jackson Public Schools. Vast tracks of this community, as previously noted, are either vacant or dilapidated and abandoned. The community is also in a food desert, with residents typically having to travel two to

three miles to access quality produce, fruits, and meats.

The Eco-Village seeks to radically alter the quality of life in West Jackson over the course of the next decade by increasing and improving the housing stock, creating quality living wage jobs, and servicing essential energy, food, and entertainment needs. The basic goal of the Eco-Village is quality cooperative housing that is green and affordable. In its broadest dimensions it will contain a significant portion of the Freedom Farms Urban Farming Cooperative, which will provide a significant number of quality jobs, house our child care cooperative, a worker and consumer grocery cooperative, and a comprehensive arts and culture entertainment complex owned and managed by the Nubia Lumumba Arts and Culture Cooperative.

The Eco-Village will also be an integrated “living-systems” community. Per the terms of “cooperative living” that we are adopting and developing, all of the residents of the housing cooperative will participate in the village’s recycling and composting programs that will create a stable protected market for recycling and urban farming cooperatives. In addition, all of the houses will primarily operate off solar energy and be connected to an internal energy grid that will foster energy efficiency and sustainability throughout the village.

Our anchor point for all of this is the Lumumba Center for Economic Democracy and Development, located at 939 W. Capitol Street, Jackson, MS 39203. The Lumumba Center is in the heart of the West Jackson community where Cooperation Jackson is targeting to establish the Eco-Village. The Lumumba Center will serve as the organizing base for the SCI and the overall administrative operations of Cooperation Jackson. The Lumumba Center is close to 6,000 square feet, possesses a restaurant-grade kitchen, and is accompanied by a back lot of over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an acre

of land, which will be used to support the urban farming and recycling cooperatives.

The Lumumba Center will serve as the base of operations and production for the Nubia Lumumba Arts and Culture Cooperative. The Arts and Culture Cooperative centers the cultural work of Cooperation Jackson, including its work in mass communications, issue framing and popular education, which are key to social movements creating transformative counter-hegemonic narratives. The Arts and Cultural Cooperative conducts regular programming out of the Lumumba Center, including cultural events (public lectures, hip hop, spoken word, and art exhibits), production sessions (films, music, and visual arts), and art and wellness trainings (production classes, art trainings, physical fitness, martial arts, yoga).

As part of our commitment to developing “new and sustainable” forms of economic activity and social living that will enable and support a Just Transition from the extractive economy, Cooperation Jackson is committed to ensuring that the Lumumba Center will be one of the “greenest” buildings and business operations in Jackson. In line with our vision of sustainability, we will utilize as much of the surface area of the building as possible for the production of solar energy. We will also weatherize and retrofit the Center to reduce energy and water consumption. We intend to make the Lumumba Center a practical and living model of sustainability to set a new standard for business operations in Jackson.

### **A Just Transition in Service of Sustainable Communities**

In support of and in addition to the Sustainable Communities Initiative, we are also pushing the following policy and programmatic demands to help facilitate a Just Transition in the City of Jackson.

#### *Human Rights City Campaign*

This campaign is an initiative to establish a Human Rights Charter for the City of Jackson in pursuit of greater protections that facilitate more equitable social relations for its residents. A Human Rights Commission would enforce the Human Rights Charter and its statutes. The Charter would be based on a people-centered analysis of all of the essential covenants, conventions, and treaties that comprise the human rights framework, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The commission we envision would first and foremost create a “Police Control Board,” an elected body that would have the right to monitor, subpoena, and indict police officers for gross misconduct and constitutional and human rights abuses. The commission would also have committees or councils that would develop policies and programs to fully address all of the aforementioned issue areas based on international norms and standards, including: a) Rights of Mother Earth; b) People of African Descent; c) Indigenous Peoples; d) Historically Discriminated Minorities; e) Immigrant Rights; f) Workers Rights; g) Housing Rights; h) Women’s Rights; i) Children’s Rights; j) LGBTQI Rights; k) Disability Rights; l) Religious Protections; and m) Cultural Rights.

#### *Clean Community Energy*

Cooperation Jackson’s campaign to make Jackson one of the most sustainable cities in the world is a localized attempt to transition the city away from the extractive economy. It is also working to make Jackson a leader in the production of sustainable energy, via solar and wind power generation, which will compel a scaling down of the extractive economy. We are currently engaged in a public relations education campaign to get Entergy (the municipal energy company) to follow through on preliminary agreements it made with Mayor Chok-

we Lumumba's administration to institute a broad program of solar conversion. We are also engaged in a campaign to have the City of Jackson take the lead on the creation of clean energy by dedicating its buildings and vacant lands towards the production and distribution of solar energy. Accompanying this as a model, Cooperation Jackson is going to ensure that the Eco-Village starts on the basis of drawing 50%, and gradually all of its energy, from renewable sources, primarily solar energy. We are also in the process of creating a "clean energy" division of our Construction Cooperative that will specialize on building and installing solar panels for affordable community use. We are working with the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives (MAC) and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF) on a campaign to get the numerous utility cooperatives in Mississippi to institute a broad program of solar energy conversion and production in the rural portions of the state. Finally, a joint study group of Cooperation Jackson and the People's Assembly are developing a strategy and campaign to challenge and end fracking in the state of Mississippi, which is being aggressively pursued by Governor Phil Bryant and a host of state-based and transnational petrochemical companies.

#### *Zero Waste*

Cooperation Jackson's Recycling Cooperative focus is actively engaged in a public education campaign and a dialogue process with the new mayoral administration and anchor institutions to maintain the political and policy commitments of the administration of Chokwe Lumumba to move the City of Jackson towards becoming a "zero waste" city.

#### *Regional Food Systems*

Cooperation Jackson's Freedom Farms Urban Farming Cooperative plans to build a network of farming plots throughout Jackson, but pri-

marily concentrated in West Jackson, to create a comprehensive urban farming operation that will provide and sustain dozens of living wage jobs over time. Freedom Farms will start operations at the Lumumba Center and on several of the vacant lots in West Jackson being acquired by Cooperation Jackson that will be held in the CLT. The farming operation will start with hoop house and raised bed production and hydro, aquaponic, and aeroponic farming in some of the commercial facilities held in the CLT in West Jackson. The objective of the urban farming cooperative is to supply Jackson with high quality foods (vegetables, fruits, fish, and poultry) at affordable prices and to create sustainable, living wage jobs for Jacksonians. It will also help to address one of the other major social needs of Jackson: affordable and easily accessible healthy foods to end our food deserts and address the chronic health issues that particularly plague Black people (ranging from obesity and diabetes to hypertension and chronic heart disease). Freedom Farms will serve this need by establishing several neighborhood-based farmers markets to provide affordable produce and fish to transportation-challenged residents in low-income communities. We will also seek to address this need by becoming a primary supplier of quality organic produce to the Jackson public school system, in addition to the grocery and convenient stores that serve low-income communities.

#### *Efficient, Affordable Durable Housing*

Cooperation Jackson is in the process of creating permanently affordable and energy efficient housing in Jackson via our housing cooperative organizing effort. With the support of some of the other coops in Cooperation Jackson, the housing cooperative will start by ensuring that each house is LEED approved and draws 50% or more of its energy from solar energy. Each house will also have water catchment and efficiency systems, and will be inte-

grated into a zero waste resource regeneration (recycling) program. The housing cooperative is part of Cooperation Jackson's Sustainable Communities Initiative, detailed above. We are also engaged in a campaign to ensure that the City of Jackson remains committed to the development of more affordable and energy and resource efficient housing, as envisioned and advanced by the mayoral administration of Chokwe Lumumba.

#### *Ecosystem Restoration & Stewardship*

Cooperation Jackson plans for its urban farming and resource regeneration (recycling) cooperatives to engage in joint ecosystem stewardship initiatives. We are particularly looking to support work protecting the wetlands in and around Jackson by launching a citywide campaign to end organic refuse into the city's

antiquated storm drain system. Eliminating this type of dumping will help the city better clean the sledge that currently clogs and contaminates the drainage system, and help eliminate the production of toxic sludge within it. The leaves, grass, and organic waste that are currently dumped into the system by numerous inhabitants can be recycled and reused as organic compost to support local farmers and restore the depleted topsoil of the Mississippi Delta region.

As should be clear from this presentation, Cooperation Jackson has made some significant advances in its relatively brief history, based on the foundations laid by the People's Assembly and the Lumumba Administration. Next to the People's Assembly, it is now the tip of the spear in our offensive engagements to advance the Jackson-Kush Plan.

## **By Way of Conclusion**

I opened this study by noting that the fundamental aim of this experiment is to attain power. It is clear from this retelling and by looking at our movement's most recent victory—a resolution passed by the city council to institute a process to make Jackson a Human Rights City, with a Human Rights Charter and Commission—that we have had and continue to experience small “tastes of power.” But the road to social liberation is long, windy, and often treacherous.

With our shift towards building Cooperation Jackson following the defeat of Chokwe Antar Lumumba, our biggest challenge is to secure enough resources and capital to build the organization and finance our initial start-ups. Although this is a challenge for all new cooperatives, it is particularly acute for us, as our

movement does not have the backing of any of the local or regional sources of finance capital. Virtually all of these sources are opposed to major aspects of our program and avidly supported our opponents in the most recent election. And by all indications, the harder we push and the more we advance, the more determined they become to hinder if not completely arrest our development.

A lot is now riding on the success of Cooperation Jackson. If it succeeds—if only in launching two or three viable cooperatives within the next two years—it will serve as proof positive that our vision is attainable. Should it seriously struggle or fall short, it may reinforce the capitalist narrative that “there is no alternative,” and that any and all efforts to produce social equity via collective processes are bound to

fail. After decades of combating self-hate, individualism, consumerism, and the ethos of “get rich or die trying”—and attaining some success—we cannot afford to go even one step backwards. So the pressure is on, and we are stuck between something of a rock and a hard place, given our current financial limitations. As such we are going to have to be innovative and creative to survive and thrive, to say the least. But we are busy looking for national and international allies to make strategic commitments to support us in overcoming the challenge of accessing capital and other resources.

At the same time, we are encouraged by how much national and international attention our work has received. The “Jackson Rising: New Economies Conference” that we hosted in May 2014 has drawn praise as one of the most influential and inspirational conferences in decades as relates to solidarity economics and economic democracy in the United States. Our People’s Assembly model has been adopted by many of the forces involved in the growing Ferguson Resistance/Black Lives Matter movement, as well as our people-centered human rights agenda, best expressed by the

adoption of our demand for a National Plan of Action for Racial Justice and Self-Determination. Our challenge is to transform all of this interest and enthusiasm into a national and international network of support that will help us advance the Jackson-Kush Plan and continue to build the transformative movements of our age—from Occupy Wall Street to #BlackLivesMatter.

Unfortunately we do not possess a crystal ball to indicate where we will ultimately land. Despite that, our collective confidence has grown through this experience as we have witnessed time and time again something that Mayor Lumumba often stressed, that “a movement that secures the love and confidence of the people has no bounds.” We are still very much making the road by walking, and we are certain that we are still headed down the right path. We believe that our experiences and contributions are worth learning from, and we hope that others engaged in the struggle to liberate humanity will welcome them in the spirit in which they are shared: that of unity and struggle.

Stay tuned!

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