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**Calling Black Activists to St. Louis: The Black Radical Congress Turns 10
The African World
By Bill Fletcher, Jr.
BlackCommentator.com Executive Editor**

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It really hit me the other day that there is a major crisis brewing "out there." It is not just one thing but a number of things coming together that some people have described as a "perfect storm." For me it was just the realization that I am feeling more and more squeezed financially. And, like so many other people, I first tried figuring out what I was doing wrong. I then had a revelation: hey stupid, I said to myself, the problem is not you (even if you have some problems); the problem is that the system is stomping harder and harder on people.

The mortgage crisis, compounded by the credit crisis, compounded by the declining dollar, compounded by the rise in the cost of fuel, compounded by the environmental crisis, compounded by the sense of endless war says that not only is our living standard eroding but that the overall conditions under which we are living are deteriorating. While this is happening the upper 20% of society seems to feel that things are basically ok. After all, if they run into trouble, the government will bail them out. The rest of us? Well, you know how that story goes.

For Black America, however, the crisis is actually not new. Our unemployment rate is always double that of whites, and for quite some time we have been facing a particular housing crisis in the cities related to gentrification. Yet over the last year, the crisis that has been facing Black America has been deepening within our communities, but also spreading to others.

Many people seem to think that we should wait and see who is elected President of

the United States, i.e., if the right person is elected we can rest easy. History teaches us that such a course would be a disaster. A new president, be they Democrat or Republican, will be watching to see how the populace moves or does not move. If there is no anti-war movement, for instance, it is less likely that they will feel any imperative to withdraw from Iraq and/or Afghanistan. If working people are not up in arms about home foreclosures, unemployment and healthcare, again, the new Administration will move forward based upon the pressure that it does receive from other, more powerful, sectors. Certainly we will hear rhetoric from the new Administration, but time and again it is demonstrated that without a social movement that is committed to struggling, very little happens.

Ten years ago (June Teenth weekend, 1998) approximately 2000 Black activists gathered in Chicago to found the [Black Radical Congress](#). Tired of deteriorating conditions in our communities compounded by our own lack of unity, we set out to build an initiative that would bring together those of us to the left-of-center who were committed to fundamental social change in the USA. The idea was not to create a talk-shop - though talking with one another rather than at one another is very important - but to build a level of working unity so that we could start pushing, first within Black America, and then more broadly for deeper changes that address the long standing racist oppression under which Black America has suffered.

These ten years have been difficult. Local organizing committees (chapters) were formed in about a dozen cities, and several organizations affiliated to the BRC. Local campaigns were launched dealing with police brutality, education, worker's rights, as well as attempts at working with various organizations on reparations. Yet building an institution like the BRC, which is essentially a coalition, is very complicated. Nearly everyone wanted the BRC to have a national campaign; the problem is that we could not agree on which one. We also have had generational challenges, with different forms of organization and leadership styles reflective of different generational and ideological experiences.

Despite all of this, the BRC continued forward and, interestingly, Black activists continued to seek it out to join. Many of us in and around the BRC would jokingly say that if the BRC did not exist it would have been created in either case. The BRC has filled a need that exists in Black America for an organization or pole that actually speaks truth to power; and more than that, takes on the power that is crushing Black America, with action and ideas reflecting this new century.

June 20-22 the BRC is convening a critical gathering in St. Louis (for info, see [blackradicalcongress.org](#)). Particularly in the years that have followed the Katrina disaster, as well as in the midst of this historic Presidential campaign, along with the crises mentioned above, the question on the floor is a simple one: how can Black progressive and left-wing activists become more than the sum of our parts? How, in other words, can we have an impact on real-world events such that we are pushing for structural changes in U.S. domestic AND foreign policies?

In the coming weeks leading up to the BRC conference I will be writing about some of the issues that will need to be confronted. I look forward to hearing back from you, the reader, on these matters. It is clear that we have to figure out how to bring together disparate groupings. We need to figure out how to successfully link with

other social movements, including social movements that are not mainly Black. And we need to identify a means to create a "safe space" where we can debate issues without devolving into factional stances. This is a mighty challenge, but one that is both exciting and daunting.

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