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**Black radicals and the Crisis of Black leadership
The African World
By Bill Fletcher, Jr.
BlackCommentator.com Executive Editor**

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I hope that you will be joining me at the [Black Radical Congress](#) conference in St. Louis, June 20 – 22. Thinking about this upcoming conference surfaced some larger concerns I have been having.

The issues that confront Black America, not to mention the rest of the USA, often feel overwhelming. Whether one is discussing environmental devastation, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, unemployment, or the financial crisis, the conditions are being laid for what one writer has described as a “perfect storm.”

Among left-of-center Black activists, in the face of this crisis there is confusion, if not disarray. Some people are pinning all of their hopes on a Barack Obama victory in November as laying the foundations for turning the tide on this situation. Others, in discounting both the Obama campaign and a possible Obama presidency, are focused on the Cynthia McKinney candidacy as being the true voice for Black

progressives and leftists, or they may be considering other campaigns, such as Ralph Nader's.

The problem is that while electoral politics can and should play a critical role in any progressive movement, it accomplishes very little if there is no organization on the ground. Furthermore, if Black radicals (broadly defined) are divorced from the concerns of grassroots Black folks and the struggles in which they are engaged, we have only a limited impact.

A friend of mine recently discussed what he termed "professional commentators" as being the description of many alleged activists who are not or have not been involved directly in the everyday battles of our people, whether such battles are around police brutality or for organizing a union. I thought for a while about this expression and believe that there is some truth to this. On the one hand, commentary and analysis are absolutely critical. If we have no framework in order to understand what is going on, our actions will be aimless.

Yet, my friend is pointing to a deeper problem. If we believe that our activism is limited to Internet interventions, and the responses that we get, we not only discount those who are not on-line, but we are actually encouraging relatively passive activity. In that sense, it is important to connect on-line activism with direct, one-on-one activism.

This is not enough, however. Black progressives and leftists seem to have difficulty linking a strategic direction with organizational sustainability. Let me put it another way: we can talk until the cows come home about what we need to do and where we need to go, but we have to figure out how we will get there. Let's take the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, by way of example. If we are to transform Black opposition to these wars into a concrete practice, what do we do? It is not enough to talk about how much Black people oppose the wars. We need to have a real campaign, which means that we need both organization and leadership, not to mention a strategy.

Taking such steps often seems to elude us for reasons that I cannot fathom. Not only that, there is a reluctance to accept that we can have differences, sometimes very sharp differences, within the same organization. I experienced that within the BRC some years ago when an intense debate took place concerning Zimbabwe and the presidency of Robert Mugabe. Individuals who agreed with one another on 90% of things, would be at odds on Zimbabwe, often engaging in destructive verbal and written exchanges.

The net impact of this sort of behavior has been a relative paralysis within the Black Freedom Movement in the face of the challenges mentioned above. I do not wish to pin this on our enemies - who certainly delight in our troubles - but they are certainly the chief beneficiaries. We have to take responsibility for this situation, which means that we need to take steps to correct it.

The other result of this morass is our search for saviors, that is, individuals who through the power of leadership can bring us together. Rather than recognizing that leaders are actually created and/or shaped by the rise of movements from below, too many of us wait in utter desperation for the appearance of the "One", to borrow from the *Matrix* trilogy.

I am not going to the BRC conference expecting miracles. I am going because I feel that I have something to learn. I am also going because of my assumption that

through vehicles such as the BRC one can multiply the impact of individual activism, uniting with the strengths of others in order to accomplish a clearly defined purpose.

Will I see you in St. Louis?


BlackCommentator.com Executive Editor, Bill Fletcher, Jr., is a Senior Scholar with the [Institute for Policy Studies](#), the immediate past president of [TransAfrica Forum](#) and co-author of the **just released** book, [Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path toward Social Justice](#) (University of California Press), which examines the crisis of organized labor in the USA. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Fletcher.

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