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**The Democracy Charter  
And The Fierce Urgency of Now  
By Jack O'Dell**

**BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator**

*Note: The Democracy Charter, written by long-time civil rights, peace, and labor activist Jack O'Dell has been provided to BlackCommentator.com by Michael Zweig, Director, Center for Study of Working Class Life, Department of Economics, State University of New York, Stony Brook, NY.*

*Zweig writes the following about O'Dell:*

Jack O'Dell first articulated the idea of a Democracy Charter for the United States in his plenary address at the How Class Works - 2004 conference at Stony Brook. It is based on the South African experience with their Freedom Charter, adopted in 1955 as a founding document of the ultimately successful struggle to abolish apartheid. The current document is Jack's elaboration of those ideas and his call to action around them. He writes:

"One of the most common questions often expressed in conversation [today] is, "*What do we do now?*" One step we could take, which holds the potential for fundamental changes in our country, would be to take a page from the South African experience in their long struggle to abolish apartheid. In 1955, after many months of organizing and public meetings across the country, a grassroots Congress of the People was elected, and it assembled in an area outside Johannesburg. It proclaimed and adopted a Freedom Charter that served and inspired sustained mass mobilization for a South Africa beyond apartheid.

"A similar act of realignment and purpose for our country, in the conditions prevailing here, would be the adoption of a "Democracy Charter" as the vision of the America we hope to create. Such a vision, born of experience, would embody the hopes and possibilities of this age in human history. A Democracy Charter would be designed to unite our movement and involve ever-broader sections of the population in the struggle to achieve what we are *for*, as our efforts to overcome continue to remove obstacles, injustices, and deprivations. It would be an intentional source of energy and shared

responsibility and enlightenment for rebuilding the sense of community that empowers us to take on with confidence the challenges that we will overcome.

"The Democracy Charter would have as its central purpose bringing into the national dialogue the millions in our country who now feel disenfranchised and disrespected, or otherwise ignored. This involvement will give all of us a confident new identity, as social change agents."

We at the Center for Study of Working Class Life are pleased to make available this analysis by Jack O'Dell, and the pamphlet *The Fierce Urgency of Now* that places Jack's work in the context of 20th century U.S. social history.

## **The Democracy Charter**

2010, marks the fifty-fifth anniversary of three significant events in the post World War II period. It is the anniversary year of the Bandung conference, held in Indonesia in 1955; the Congress of the People, held in Kliptown, South Africa; and the Montgomery bus boycott in Alabama.

Each of these was a seminal event in its own right. The Bandung Conference gave birth to the Non-Aligned Movement and established the prospect that the struggle to abolish colonialism would be victorious. The meeting in Kliptown, South Africa, adopted a Freedom Charter to guide the movement to abolish apartheid at a time when the apartheid system was being tightened by repressive measures. And the Montgomery bus boycott shifted the center of grassroots mass action to the Southern heartland of segregation and set into motion an example that would inspire the freedom movement across the country in our struggle to abolish institutional racism.

Each of these events, in one way or another, has informed our activism in the movement, whatever the moment we entered into involvement. Because these events in 1955 occurred at the height of the Cold War abroad and Cold War McCarthyism at home, they carry the fundamental lesson: even in the darkest periods, the people have the power to create the light that illuminates our path to more hopeful times.

Today these events remind us of the achievements that have been made, as well as the unfinished agenda of concerns that continue to challenge us. Today, even as the world observes, in memory, the ending of the Second World War and the victory over Fascism, we are all at the same time witness to the martyrdom of the cities of Iraq by an unjustified, unprovoked U.S.-led military invasion of that small country. We are all witness to the tragedy of the growing impoverishment taking place in our own country among the unemployed, the homeless, those trying desperately to hang onto their jobs with little or no hope. We are all witness to the breaking up of the sense of community that so many feel. Our movement strains to keep up the creative energy of protest against these injustices, often even in the face of assaults on the right to peacefully assemble, frustration with the election process, and other experiences. These add up to "a long train of abuses" that have become part of everyday life.

One of the most common questions often expressed in conversation is, "What do we do now?" One step we could take, which holds the potential for fundamental changes in our country, would be to take a page from the South African experience in their long struggle to abolish apartheid. In 1955, after many months of organizing and public meetings across the country, a grassroots Congress of the People was elected, and it assembled in an area outside Johannesburg. It proclaimed and adopted a Freedom Charter that served and inspired sustained mass mobilization for a South Africa beyond apartheid.

A similar act of realignment and purpose for our country, in the conditions prevailing here, would be the adoption of a "Democracy Charter" as the vision of the America we hope to create. Such a vision, born of experience, would embody the hopes and possibilities of this age in human history. A Democracy Charter would be designed to unite our movement and involve ever-broader sections of the population in the struggle to achieve what we are for, as our efforts to overcome continue to remove obstacles, injustices, and deprivations. It would be an intentional source of energy and shared responsibility and enlightenment for rebuilding the sense of community that empowers us to take on with confidence the challenges that we will overcome. The Democracy Charter would have as its central purpose bringing into the national dialogue the millions in our country who now feel disenfranchised and disrespected, or otherwise ignored. This involvement will give all of us a confident new identity, as social change agents.

The time is ripe for us, the People of the United States, in all our multicultural diversity and breadth of experience, to adopt a Democracy Charter that brings together as part of a shared vision all of the dimensions of the civilizational crisis that are now being actively addressed, on a limited scale, by one or another organization.

The essential purpose of such a charter is the expansion of democracy and fundamental human rights in our country. Therefore, the historical point of reference of the Democracy Charter is our nation's Bill of Rights and the subsequent Amendments, won over generations of struggle to enshrine them in the U.S. Constitution. In the U.S. American experience, unyielding resistance to any and all efforts to weaken the Bill of Rights is an essential condition for the transition from formal democracy to a society of substantive democracy. At the very heart of the unfolding struggle for substantive democracy today are the issues of race, class, and gender, in relation to power and decision-making. This has been the fundamental reality since the birth of this Republic.

To briefly review this historical point, the U.S. was the first of a number of communities of European settler colonialism in the hemisphere of the Americas to break with its "mother" country. The architects of the new state then rapidly proceeded to structure their own "made in U.S.A." mechanisms of exploitation and wealth accumulation. During the first century following its Declaration of Independence, this structure put into place and rested upon four pillars: First, the seizure of lands held by Native Americans and the privatization of this property, accompanied by the dismantling of the centuries-old social organization of these original inhabitants; second, the consolidation and expansion of the system of enslavement of Africans, as an economic institution inherited from years of British rule

and codified into law in the new U.S. Constitution (a kind of affirmative action to the benefit of the slave owners); third, the military seizure and annexation, in the War of 1846-1848, of a land area amounting to one third of the Mexican Republic; and fourth, the exploitation of a wage-labor working class among the new immigrant population brought in primarily from northern Europe, with the notable exception of Chinese workers, who were admitted for long enough to help complete the railroad to the West Coast, then denied further entry through the Chinese Exclusion Act passed by Congress. The position of women in this paradigm is self-evident, especially since they were denied the formal democratic right to vote until 1919. These historical circumstances, taken together with the success of the American Revolution itself in breaking free of the British Empire, provided both the material conditions and the political power base for the economic royalists of the new republic to shape and promote the ideology of "American exceptionalism" as a major component in U.S. culture. Further, the much-valued achievements of formal democracy as exemplified by the Bill of Rights reveal their limitations in daily life experience. Consequently the need is urgent to take up the banner of struggle for substantive democracy and empower this process.

The following points suggest primary items for inclusion in a proposed Democracy Charter.

### **I. A national commitment to end homelessness during this next decade.**

Eighty percent of the homeless are women and people of color, more often than not, families with children. Twelve million people pay more than fifty percent of their monthly income for either rent or mortgage, often for substandard housing -- such is the shortage of affordable housing. Relief to these twelve million and the uncounted numbers of homeless beyond them would also create jobs and the basis for expanding job skills training in the construction and other industries.

Rising unemployment and the millions of families made economically insecure by the subprime mortgage racket may prove to be a set of circumstances of long-term duration. Democracy, in this instance, requires the emergence of nonviolent organized mass actions to stop the evictions, neighborhood by neighborhood, and enable people to stay in their homes while new mortgage terms are negotiated. This is the indispensable ingredient in this situation. Such community activity should be accompanied by full use of the Legal Services Corporation, which is legally required to assist homeowners in preventing evictions but should also be empowered to bring class action suits against those insurance, bank, and real estate corporations that have created this subprime problem.

### **II. A national commitment to an economy of full employment, at socially useful jobs, and a livable wage as public policy.**

In the late 1970s, Congress passed the Humphrey-Hawkins bill, which set a national goal of full employment: the maximum allowable unemployment was to be 4 percent. Even this goal has largely been ignored as public policy and rarely achieved; and 4 percent unemployment is still too high. Yet in some of our largest urban centers, for example, unemployment among African American men is over 40 percent. Official

propaganda in times of recession praising a "jobless recovery" is a cover-up for long-term depression and stagnation as the economic reality. The Humphrey-Hawkins Bill must be revived as an indispensable standard point of reference in gaining an accurate measurement of the real state of the economy. It should be applied across the board to measure unemployment among women heads of households and the real conditions of communities of color.

Democracy in the workplace is an essential part of the effort at rebuilding our communities that have in so many places been shattered by plant closings, unemployment, wage stagnation, and wage cuts. Workers are entitled to have a voice in determining their working conditions, health and safety, and hours on the job as well as determining their share of the profits derived from their labor. These standards are an indispensable part of a robust democracy.

Workers in agriculture and domestic service are an integral part of the working class community, and that reality must be respected in the making of public policy.

Today, the many grassroots state and local movements are the standard bearers setting the pace for the demand for jobs for all who seek them. Recognition of workers' inalienable right to self-organization is one way of guaranteeing that the struggle for these goals is sustained.

**III. The right to an environment free of bigotry, violence, and intolerance as an expression of our nation's irreversible commitment to human rights, including full recognition of reproductive rights and the rights of gays and lesbians.**

The twentieth century has witnessed landmark Supreme Court decisions, including *Roe vs. Wade* (1973), affirming the reproductive rights of women, and *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), affirming the right of African American children to equal access to education in the public schools, free of state-imposed racial segregation. Despite the significant contributions these decisions have made to the moral progress of the nation, they continue to be the subject of sustained attack in a variety of forms, primarily coming from the conservative right, some groups striving to assert biblical support for their positions. This is often combined with relentless organized efforts to consign gays and lesbians to an outcast status in U.S. society, in violation of their basic human rights.

None of this is acceptable to a society committed to preserving and improving its democracy.

A principled defense and active protection of the entire fabric of human rights as an indivisible whole is the real basis for guaranteeing respect for all.

**IV. The doors of learning open to all, from early childhood education through college, as a public trust and another dimension of human rights.**

This is for our time the next step in the "Economic Bill of Rights" proposed by

President Roosevelt in 1944 as public policy, but abandoned after his death and the deliberate creation of Cold War politics. The National Education Association estimated in 2002 that the nation's public schools could be put into Grade A physical condition for an investment of about 380 billion dollars. Our nation spent almost half that amount on the war on Iraq in its first year, and the accumulated cost is still rising, quite aside from the moral deficit it so markedly represents. The quality of our public school educational system is not a "states' rights" issue. It is an issue of paramount importance in shaping the quality of life and character of the United States as a democracy. All of us have a stake in putting an end to the common experience we share that every time there is an economic crisis and budget cuts are called for, the first things scrapped in our public schools are art, music, recreational sports, and field trips. These are character-building school subjects and are among the essentials of a quality education.

As for postsecondary education, we must never forget that tens of thousands of our young people who volunteer for the Armed Forces are not seeking an opportunity to go to war or be trained to kill. They are looking for an opportunity to go to college and improve their lives. This is an investment in our nation's future.

A public education system that prepared youngsters to begin formal learning, then supported them as far as their ability and inclination took them, would strengthen our country's economic position and civil society.

A major contribution towards substantive democracy would be for the U.S. to become officially bilingual, as a nation, in English and Spanish. As one benefit, national bilingualism would greatly enrich our knowledge of the hemisphere in which we live and help us "overcome" much of the national chauvinism which weakens the democratic character of U.S. life.

#### **V. A new foreign and military policy as an expression of our nation's character.**

This means a foreign policy of peace, cooperation with our neighbors throughout the hemisphere of the Americas, and mutual respect that guarantees the future of the planet as our shared home. The "Superpower" or "Lone Superpower" rhetoric of the Cold War is without merit as an operational concept in the conduct of foreign policy. It promotes racism and national arrogance, accompanied by a false sense of national security. It helps institutionalize bloated, wasteful military budgets as normal; pollutes and distorts the practices of government diplomacy; and predictably depletes our reserves of moral capital in the world.

Nothing underscores the latter cluster of circumstances more clearly than the role played by the U.S. in denying the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people over decades, and the U.S.-led or -sponsored military aggression in Iraq, Afghanistan, Haiti, and Colombia today. These harsh truths have been amply documented, as has the record of calculated deception of the public here at home which usually accompanies these activities -- regardless of which "major political party" is in power. This abuse of power constitutes a monumental example of unaccountable government. Public awareness of U.S. overseas activities -- both corporate and

political -- and their effects has been steadily growing. This is evidenced in our country's very active anti-war movement, which is increasingly putting emphasis on creating a peace culture, as an antidote to the war culture so pervasive in the U.S. Nevertheless, foreign and military policy is an area of the people's business that requires a quantum leap in public awareness and involvement, in order that a progressive content be given to our relations with the rest of the world. Experience has shown that such a transformation is not only a moral imperative; it is absolutely essential to improving conditions here at home.

A new foreign and military policy means a new kind of defense budget, one in harmony with other domestic goals, not one designed to enrich the biggest corporate "defense" contractors and their stockholders, while the public pays the bill. A new foreign and military policy also means that no longer will the U.S. government produce, use, or sell weapons -- such as land mines, cluster bombs, depleted uranium shells, or Agent Orange -- that destroy the environment in which living beings have to survive. The Vietnamese people are still suffering from the catastrophic effects of these weapons used against them.

A new foreign and military policy means getting our representatives in Congress to undertake the closing of all of the estimated 700 US military bases now operating on foreign soil -- and to secure the closing of these bases "with all deliberate speed." In this regard, particular attention should be given to restoring to the peoples of the islands of Guam (South Pacific) and Diego Garcia (Indian Ocean) the right to return to their traditional lands, from which they were forcibly removed to make way for the construction of military bases. This aggressive militarism is one of the new forms in which the old colonialism is being revived. Our movement has significant expertise in the area of developing more principled foreign policy, as represented, for example, by the work over many decades carried out by the American Friends Service Committee. Since our nation led the world into the era of nuclear weapons, we should lead the world by example out of that era by renouncing the possession of nuclear weapons and taking concrete steps to eliminate the U.S. stockpile of nuclear weapons, as a matter of principle. The continued production of these weapons of terror is neither morally justified nor socially useful economic activity. It contributes to neither the real wealth nor the well-being of society, while it uses up nonrenewable resources that could otherwise benefit our country. Further, the use of these terrible weapons inflicts long-term damage on other countries and on our ability to function as a member of the worldwide community of nations. We, the people of the United States, can end this!

In recent years, important developments on the world scene have marked the emergence of a very active leadership and initiatives for peace and democracy coming from our neighbors in the southern hemisphere. The international conference on racism in Durban, the World Social Forum held in central Africa (2006), and the world conference on climate change hosted by Bolivia in 2010 exemplify such initiatives. This emerging leadership draws together centers of mass activity representing the voices of indigenous peoples, nations, and communities that have suffered severely from both colonialism and the newer forms of corporate exploitation. It has taken up the challenge of linking the struggle for democracy with the struggle for the

preservation of our common home, the planet Earth. This points in a new direction that is absolutely essential for this period in history. It demonstrates a social consciousness that embraces the challenges of our time, and our struggle for a robust democracy in the United States will be greatly enhanced by our relation to these currents of thought and action.

## **VI. Universal health insurance coverage (single-payer model).**

The cost of worker contributions to health care premiums in industry-sponsored plans has tripled since 1988. That tens of millions of people have either no health insurance at all or inadequate insurance to cover catastrophic illness is well known. In recent years, lack of adequate health insurance has become a major source of family financial insecurity, often leading to bankruptcy. As a nation, we in America spend \$400 billion a year on health insurance paperwork, much of it designed to eliminate patients from eligibility for benefits. At this writing, health care costs are rising three times as fast as wages. An estimated 100,000 people die every year from illnesses contracted while in the hospital as patients, and the US has the lowest life expectancy of any of the wealthy industrialized countries in the Western world.

A system in which the government paid expenses necessary to cure illnesses and injuries and also took responsibility for promoting practices that help maintain good health would improve our country's international standing in measures of life expectancy and productivity. It would also remove the unfairness and pathology of a health care system in which prices are based upon satisfying corporate greed and the concerns of private investors, while the quality of care is based upon the patient's ability to pay.

The United States has an outstanding tradition of public service institutions. These are represented, in part, by the public land-grant colleges authorized by Congress at the end of the Civil War; the system of public health clinics, whose professionals provide inoculations for communicable diseases like diphtheria and measles; the neighborhood public libraries all across the country that are centers for quiet reading and relaxation and often provide space for community meetings; and our outstanding National Parks Service, which has recently celebrated its centennial year. These are among the precedents that give us full confidence in the advocacy of a universal health insurance system, single-payer model.

## **VII. A Social Security system with firm and undiminished integrity.**

Our present Social Security system is both a shared commitment to contribute during our employed years and a universal benefit we share in our retirement years. It is our nation's premier anti-poverty program, protecting more young people as beneficiaries than does current "welfare," in its "reformed" state. Without Social Security, half of all women over 65 would fall into poverty. One major way to strengthen this important institution, put in place during the years of Roosevelt's New Deal, would be to tighten federal regulatory control so that the Social Security Trust Fund could not be raided to finance "off-budget" wars. (Yearly surpluses in the Trust Fund were used by President Lyndon Johnson, for instance, to finance the early years of the war in Vietnam.)



### **VIII. A farm economy restructured to rest on family and cooperative enterprise.**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is a major problem area needing restructuring for the renewal of our democracy. In the early decades of the 20th century, family farming was the major form of property ownership among Americans, including African Americans in the South. Today, African Americans own less than 2 percent of farms. Millions of people in our country are skilled, professional farmers. They should not be subjected to the greed and unbridled power of the corporate monopolies in agriculture and the retail market. Everyone will benefit if the traditional family farm, cooperatives, and the new urban community food gardens and farmers markets become once again the primary source of food production.

### **IX. A prison system accountable to the public for fulfilling its charge as a center for rehabilitation.**

The responsibility of the penal system is to guide the rehabilitation of incarcerated people so that, with the help of families, neighbors, and social service agencies, they can renew their place in the community. The existence of a "prison-industrial complex" in our country is a fundamental violation of the social purpose of the prison system in a democratic society. As for the operation of U.S. prisons in other countries, this is an affront to the sovereignty of such countries and a disgrace to our own. All such institutions should be permanently closed as a matter of public policy, and the penal system should be redesigned to carry out its social purpose.

### **X. Restoration, preservation, and protection of the quality of our natural environment as a vital social inheritance for future generations to use and enjoy.**

Reversing the present pattern of pollution and degradation requires promoting and expanding community activities, as well as public works projects, that encourage a culture of social responsibility towards keeping our rivers, lakes, parks, and other environmental gifts in healthy condition. Our country has a long-term interest in becoming one of the leaders in worldwide efforts to stop contributing to global warming and to protect from harm our common home, this planet.

### **XI. Expanded public ownership and management of resources strategic to the health of our nation's economy.**

Such strategic resources include oil, gas, and other sources of energy, as well as public transportation. Stricter federal and state regulation against pollution and mismanagement would accompany the growth in public ownership. Louisiana, with its "cancer alley" created by the reckless disregard of the petrochemical industry for public health concerns, makes the case for public ownership and accountability. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) offers one model even as it currently undergoes steady attack from the coal-power lobby.

### **XII. Statehood for the District of Columbia as the centerpiece of commitment to long-overdue electoral reform.**

The guarantee that every vote will be counted is an inseparable part of the right to vote. The assault on the voting system itself, which we and the world witnessed in Florida, Ohio, and other states in two successive Presidential elections, is now recognized as a nationwide problem of scandalous proportions. Because this problem remains unrepaired, we face yet another Congressional election in which defects in the voting process could determine the results. As long as we allow this situation to continue, our elections are far less representative of democracy than those held in most Western industrialized countries. The absence of voting members of the Senate and House of Representatives for the citizens of the nation's capital is a conspicuous example of this lack of democracy. The principle of fair voter access and accurate, accountable vote tabulation should be visibly maintained, and should be reinforced by the introduction of a system of proportional representation in all elections where applicable.

### **XIII. The air waves maintained as national public property.**

We affirm this principle upon which the Federal Communications Commission was founded, as a regulatory agency, during the New Deal period: "The air waves are the property of the American people." The democracy that this principle embodies has been hijacked and distorted by the hucksters of marketplace television and the demagogues of hate-radio. The consolidation of corporate power in these areas -- together with their counterpart, the film industry -- denies the public's right to be informed, limits public access to a violence-free culture, and confines the exercise of artistic creativity.

The media must be responsible to their audience, not to advertisers or powerful pressure groups. We affirm the principle of public airwave ownership as indispensable to the struggle for achievement of a substantive democracy in our country, especially in this age of global communications and the bright possibilities they offer.

### **Towards the Second Reconstruction**

The electoral coalition which brought victory to the American people in the election of President Barack Obama has the capacity to become a Movement, and indeed it has a mandate of history to do so. What the people of the United States, in a clear majority, elected was not only an affirmation of our best hopes for the future: it is important to note that it also closed the door, momentarily, to a bid for power by a much darker spirit in the American experience. This magnificent moment is ours to preserve and extend, but it will not remain so without our concerted and sustained attention and social change activism guided by both past and present experiences.

These thirteen points, with the abbreviated comments that accompany them, are meant essentially as a framework for incorporating other vital issues of concern to such a Charter. There is no order of priority herein, but an attempt to present a picture that will enable us to view these vital issues as a body in their interconnectedness, rather than just separately. To further elaborate and project remedies applicable is the purpose for movement-building, as a sustaining force.

The Charter proposal is designed to acknowledge and enhance the effective work that

is already being done in many areas of Movement activity. When harnessed to the grassroots organizing tradition, the Democracy Charter can bring new energy that is transformational in its possibilities for social change in our nation. It must become a full part of the "good news" that involves and inspires our artists, poets, and creators in all cultural media to give of their talents spreading this message of hope and new possibilities.

Because of its perspective of emphasis on our Movement's goals and objectives, the Charter is an invitation that seeks to engage a different kind of national conversation - one that is positive and purposeful in the sharing of experiences and free of the tone that too often discourages participation. This is a great moment for all of us, as we confidently take up the challenge to create a vision, shared with the people all around us, that embodies "Freedom from Fear" and expands the Movement/community, built by the people all around us, as they actively embrace the ideas of the Charter they have created and proceed to translate these hope into constructive actions.

The common ingredients in all this liberating work are integrity and love.

The Democracy Charter seeks to penetrate the depths of what Dr. Martin Luther King more than forty years ago called "the deeper malady that afflicts the American spirit, of which Vietnam is but a symptom" (Riverside Church speech, April 4, 1967). This malady which Dr. King identified has become in our lifetime a contagion the symptoms of which are all around us.

Recognizing and accepting this challenge is the key to the success of all of our collective efforts to transform our nation into a peaceful, socially conscious democracy.

In this spirit, we shall overcome!