

A Model for Black-Brown Movement Building

SNCC 60th Anniversary Conference

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Speakers Include:

Rachel Gilmer- Co-Director of the Dream Defenders

Paul Ortiz- Professor of History and Director of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, University of Florida

Zoharah Simmons - Professor Emerita, African American Religions & Islamic Studies, University of Florida and SNCC Veteran, SNCC Legacy Project Board Member

Maria Varela - Organizer, Writer, Photographer, and Occasional Adjunct Professor

The discussion centers around the need for black and brown communities across the United States to organize together. We are facing the same struggles. The panelists lay out various steps that are needed to do this effectively.

Zoharah Simmons: Good afternoon or good morning, depending on where you are, and a warm welcome to all of you who are attending the SNCC's [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] 60th-anniversary conference. This panel is a model for black and brown movement building. I am [Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons](#), and it is my pleasure to serve as the moderator for this panel. I am an SNCC veteran. I became a student activist with SNCC in 1962 as a student at [Spelman College](#) in Atlanta, Georgia. I joined the staff in 1964 during the [Mississippi Freedom Summer Project](#) and was on the SNCC staff until 1967.

While our panel will focus on models of black and brown organizing, primarily in the US, we will also focus on both the history of black and brown organizing in the US but also in this hemisphere. I want to thank one of our panelists, [Maria Varela](#), for envisioning this panel and suggesting it to the SNCC 60th planning committee.

She reminded us that in the mid-sixties, SNCC was the first civil rights organization to provide critical support to [Cesar Chavez](#) and [Dolores Huerta](#), [United Farm Worker Union](#) in California. In 1965, SNCC responded to the United Farm Workers' request for training in nonviolence tactics, CB radios, cars, and funding for two staff to work full-time on their union campaign. SNCC's support for the grape boycott was critical in the union's victory in achieving the contract. Maria ends by reminding us that this was an effective approach to coalition building, not through ideology, but through the sharing of practical resources and support.

In many ways, black and brown coalition, formal and informal building, historically and contemporarily is the theme of this panel. So, I'm pleased to introduce our three panelists. First, I will introduce [Dr. Paul Ortiz](#). Paul is an activist, organizer and scholar. He is a professor of history and director of the Samuel Proctor oral history program at the University of Florida in

Gainesville. Ortiz has written five books, one of which is an African American and Latinx history of the United States. That book was identified by Fortune magazine as quote, one of the 10 books on American history that reflects the United States. End of quote, Paul is the recipient of numerous awards, only one of which I will mention here.

He received the Caesar Chavez Action and Commitment Award from the Florida Education Association, AFL CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization] in 2013 for his outstanding leadership through engaging in activities, that dignify workers and by making notable contributions to the labor movement. Welcome Paul.

Paul Ortiz: Thank you so much. For that very kind introduction, I want to say at the outset, how honored I am to have been invited by Maria to be on this panel and what a great event this whole weekend has been. It's been so exciting. I told Maria when we were doing one of our reorganizing meetings and she started introducing herself and I said, Marie, I know who you are. You're one of my heroes and icons just like Zoharah Simmons. It's been an amazing pleasure to get to know Rachel and the great work that she's doing with the ¹Dream defenders.

I also want to start by paying honor to one of our incredible ancestors in struggle. As Another SNCC veteran, [Elizabeth Betita Martinez-Sutherland](#), who, as you all know, was another incredible SNCC organizer who I met many years later in the Bay Area[San Francisco, California] because, of course, Betita went from being an SNCC organizer and even had an organizing life before that then moved out west. I had the great pleasure of being able to introduce this amazing SNCC veteran to many of my students at UC Santa Cruz. And we read a book that she had written called *De Colores Means All of Us*. To me, this is a model of history writing where black and brown histories are at the center of the narrative of the story. Like they always have been.

When I wrote *An African American and Latinx History in the United States*, which is roughly the history of the US from the time of the American Revolution to, to present, it was so obvious to me that our histories have always been at the center, our histories of struggle and that everything we've gotten in this country, we owe to these struggles and that nothing that we've gotten has been given to us. But unfortunately, we have a history system that makes us forget, makes us forget these incredible stories of coalition building and allyship.

So, in the few minutes I had this morning, I want to just give a quick run-through of some of these key moments of interracial, transnational, internationalist solidarity in African American, Latinx history in the United States. I really relied heavily on my own organizing experiences as an organizer with United Farm Workers during the shadow summit boycott and the strongest organizations that supported our movement in the Northwest, which eventually was successful. Ended in a union contract for farm workers, which is still enforced to this day.

¹ Dream Defenders- A non-profit organization that aims to fight against racism, poverty, and police brutality.

But our strongest supporters were in black communities in the NAACP [National Association of the Advancement of Colored People], in the coalition of black trade unionists, in black churches. They always stood up and stepped up for us. So, I already knew about this history before I went to the academy, but the problem in the academy is that too much academic writing is about supporting, defending, and uplifting. Capitalism².

Capitalism is all about competition, not just between individuals, but between groups. We have a very flawed immigration history, and scholarship in this country now. I'm a part of that comrade and that immigration history has been built upon a model of competition. The pols [Polish] compete with the Jewish immigrants, compete with the Latinx immigrants, compete with everyone. So, it is a story of a kind of war against all, but that's not how it happened.

If we start by thinking about the [Mexican War of Independence](#), which breaks out in 1810, this is a war that at the outset, was a war against slavery and war against the oppression of the Indigenous people. In addition to being a war against the Spanish empire. If you want to talk about coalition building, I suggest the Mexican War independence as this incredible example of black and brown people coming together and fighting what at that point was one of the most powerful empires in the history of the planet.

Offering sanctuary to African American slaves who could escape to Mexico even before Mexico achieved its independence. Hundreds, perhaps even thousands of African Americans are finding sanctuary in Mexico, and the great black abolitionists like [Frederick Douglass](#) and [Henry Highland Garnet](#) over and over and over again thanked the Mexican people.

They say that well, we don't have much to say about, the American people, but the Mexican people. We want to express our gratitude, and you see this over and over again in the writings of black abolitionists. I don't know how historians miss that. We talk about the Haitian revolution and the Haitian revolution is the first successful slavery revolution in human history. For those of us from Latin America, my parents were refugees from the Mexican Revolution.

In 1914, we owe the Haitian revolution in tremendous debt of gratitude because it wasn't just that the Haitians crushed and defeated slavery in 1804, finally, but that every generation, since that time, the Haitians have provided sanctuary to our freedom fighters, from Latin America. People like [Simon Bolivar](#), people like [Jose Marti](#), people like [Maximo Gomez](#), people like [Antonio Maceo](#) and the list goes on and on and on.

If you want to talk about black and brown coalition building, you must have Haiti at the center of the history of the Americas, because Haiti provides again, generations of sanctuary to our freedom fighters from Mexico, what's now Venezuela, or Columbia and other parts of the Caribbean and Latin America. It's the Haitians who provide sanctuary, for the freedom fighters from the mainland. If you will, to get refitted, to get ammunition arms, the Haitians even provide

²Capitalism- is a widely adopted economic system in which there is private ownership of the means of production.

military advisors. Y'all, I mean, that's really an amazing story of coalition building at the expense of their freedom, if you will, because, because Haiti is an ally of the Latin American liberation wars in the early 19th century, she is enemy number one of the imperialist powers, the United States, Great Britain collude with France to put an indemnity on the Haitian people that robs them of generations of resources.

In other words, Haiti must pay reverse reparations to France, and it must do that for more than a century for the fact that Haiti ends slavery. It must, it has to pay that money back. So that's kind of an early 19th-century example, just a couple of many different types of examples we could point to. Now let me fast forward of a black and brown coalition building.

Let me fast forward to the end of slavery and ³[Reconstruction in the United States](#). What I say about this in an African American Atlantic History in the United States is that for African Americans, emancipation in one country was not enough. Instead of dismantling their anti-slavery organizations, people like Henry Highland Garnett and others kept those organizations going and they retooled them and created what I call in the middle of my book, the Cuban solidarity movement.

They organize a national campaign to try to press the administration of [Ulysses Grant](#) to support the Cuban war of liberation. They garner as far as we can talk about 500,000 signatures on petitions nationally to support the Cuban war of liberation. They go to the grand administration, and they make it and they make these alliances with Cuban freedom fighters who are refugees in Tampa [Florida] New York [New York], Newark [New Jersey], and other cities. So, this is a great example of black and brown coalition buildings during reconstruction that I didn't know about before I, did this research. At the same time If you look at cities like Key West and Tampa the black and brown working-class coalitions are quite incredible. The takeaway here is that when black people make forward progress, we all progress. That is a universal rule.

It's so different than when I was taught. When I was growing up, I was taught a zero-sum. The zero-sum theory of US citizenship is that when one group gets something, another group loses something. I hate to say that academics still reinforce that flawed mindset, but when African Americans won the right to vote during Reconstruction, guess what else happened? They fight for a system called declarant alien voting, which essentially allows you to come directly from Cuba or The Bahamas, or anywhere, anywhere in the world, and become a voter within a matter of days. That's what alien declarant voting was all about.

This allowed the Cubans who were followers of say, host Sam Monart to become active in Key West and Tampa to inform this incredible black-brown working-class alliances under the rubric of groups, like the [Knights of Labor](#), and during reconstruction. The first act of the so-called redemption against black reconstruction is to end alien declarant voting. So, when black people

³Reconstruction- A period after the American Civil War(1865-1877), attempt to undo the atrocities of Slavery for Black Americans.

make the step forward, it opens these great democratic opportunities at large. But when white business supremacists seize power in the south alien declarant voting is lost during the 1880s, but the story doesn't end there. You fast-forward it, to the early 20th century.

One of the most remarkable, organizations in the history of this entire country, is the Universal Negro Improvement Association [UNIA] makes it's concerned, we, often think about uni as a black nationalist organization, and in many ways it was, but UNIA always was concerned about the freedom of people in Latin America and the Caribbean had hundreds of Spanish and other language chapters throughout Latin America and the Caribbean and UNIA was a fierce critic of the role of United fruit in creating the banana republics of Central America. If you look at the writings of Amy Garvey, she was very consistent on this point.

You have to connect black, Latino, and African American, freedom with what's happening in Latin America. The last example, I want to read you a quote that comes out of the 1928 NAACP convention. And this was a this was a convention platform that W E B Du Bois wrote and, or a speech he was asked to talk about. Why should the Negro risk our lives to regain the right to vote? And this is what he responded to or responded to within 1928," *the American ballot must be re-established on a real basis of intelligence and character only in such way. Can this nation face the tremendous problems before it, the problem of free speech and unsubsidized press and civil Liberty for all people, the problem of imperialism and the emancipation of Haiti, Nicaragua, Cuba, the Philippines, and Hawaii from the government of American banks, the overshadowing problem of peace among the nations and of decent and intelligent cooperation in the real advancement of the natives of Africa and Asia together with freedom for China, India, and Egypt*".

So it's a breathtaking freedom vision. This is on the Eve of the great depression. This comes within the African American tradition of again, what we call emancipatory internationalism. This idea that I might think I'm free, but unless my neighbor across the street or next door, or in the next country, or anywhere in the world is not free, then I'm not free. Am I, this is a long part of what Charles Payne referred to as organizing tradition. It's very internationalist. We could talk about it for hours and hours Zoharah. But I know we have to move on.

But I do want us to think about what it's like to be writing about this history in a capitalist nation, which is constantly trying to put us at odds with each other daily. Yet we have so many examples of interracial coalition building. We could go on to talk about Afro-Asian coalition building. We could talk about the role of Latinos in the anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s. So, I will go ahead and see the rest of my time. And thank you again. It's such an honor to be here.

Zoharah Simmon: Thank you so much, Paul. I'm so happy for you to give us some of that history of you know, from the 19th century forward that shows us that there has been this kind of collaboration and cooperation between black and brown people and how that has been erased from the history that is taught to us. The next speaker is Maria Varela.

As I mentioned in my opening comments, this panel was her idea, and I'm so happy to be introducing my SNCC comrade of some 50-plus years. Maria Varela is a community organizer, writer photographer, and an occasional adjunct professor who lives in New Mexico.

She was a staff member of SNCC from 1963 to 1967. Working primarily in Alabama and Mississippi, Varela[Maria] created film strips and photo books utilized by SNCC and local community organizers for various organizing campaigns. She took up the camera because of the lack of reading materials, showing black people, taking leadership to change their communities.

Varela's job as an SNCC staffer also included photographing marches as the presence of cameras, often protected marchers from violence. Varela is the first Latino woman to document the 1960s civil rights struggle in the black belt. South in 1990 Varela was awarded a Mac Arthur fellowship for her work. In 2005, She was among the 1000 women nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Welcome Maria.

I'm not hearing Maria, please..... I'm sorry, Maria. For some reason, we can see you but not hear you. I don't know what happened. I see that you're talking. Adam, are you able to try and get your sound, Maria? I'm going to introduce [Rachel Gilmer](#), our third panelist. Then we will, after Rachel, talks, we will all come on camera, hopefully to have our discussion. Rachel Gilmer is a co-director of the Dream Defenders, a membership-based organization of diverse youth, young adults, and students fighting for a better future across the state of Florida.

Rachel has over 10 years of experience in organizing grassroots and social change. She has worked in a variety of settings, including community organizations, schools, prisons, and government. Prior to the Dream Defenders. Rachel served as the associate director of the African American policy forum under the leadership of the acclaimed legal scholar, [Kimberlee Crenshaw](#) there, Rachel developed various campaigns, including the, say her name focused on sharing the experiences of black women and police violence and Black Girls matter focused on raising awareness of the specific ways black girls experienced the school to prison pipeline. Welcome.

Thank you so much for having me what an honor it is to be here. I hope we can figure out Maria's sound because she was such, she's such an important part of this history and was such an important part of bringing us together. So hopefully we'll get that, um, just fixed so that y'all can get a chance to hear from all our wisdom and experience. To start, I just wanted to bring forward a quote that is, um, in Dream Defender's membership handbook.

So every member who goes to the organization gets his handbook and it opens with this quote, if you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come here because your liberation is bound up in mind, then let us work together. I think this quote shows that we are in this together and the importance of us having a common fate and all the divide and conquer that Paul talked about. So much of what we are doing in Dream Defenders is trying to get communities to see their common fate.

Like we're living in a time where 50 million people live in poverty in this country where 10 million people plus lost their jobs because of the pandemic while US billionaires got way richer. So, what I've been trying to do is wake up every morning with that 50 million number in mind. And remember, that's my job as an organizer to bring people together; to see that is the only way we're going to make change happen. And the only way change has ever happened is through solidarity. So, I'm going to share a little bit about some of Dream Defenders, just experiences and kind of our evolution over the years around black and brown organizing, which is very much at the foundation of who the organization is, and really in the rich legacy of the black radical tradition, which is also a history of solidarity.

So, a little bit about Dream Defenders founding in 2006, um, a young man named Martin Lee Anderson, um, who was a teenager who was joyriding, his grandma's car got arrested and ended up in a juvenile boot camp in Florida. This is a boot camp where they force young people into labor. He collapsed while he was being forced to run around a track. He was killed and young people in Tallahassee [Florida] across three college campuses, Tallahassee Community College, FMU [Florida Memorial University], and Florida State University all came together to put their heads around what they were going to do about it.

An organization called the Coalition for Martin Lee Anderson started. This was very much in the spirit of the civil rights movement that is so alive in Tallahassee. There were lunch counter sit-ins in Tallahassee. There was a bus boycott in Tallahassee and all these young people came together and basically occupied. Jeb Bush's ⁴ office. As a result of that Jeb Bush was forced to close all the juvenile boot camps in Florida.

So, I think this experience very early on just showed the power of a small group of people coming together, across differences, bringing more people together, and the power and possibility of that. So all the students kind of went about their ways. You know, people graduated, moved out of state, went on to jobs, and then Trayvon Martin was murdered and a group of them got back on the phone and said what are we going to do about this?

So, we planned a big March from Bethune Cookman University to the Sanford police department to demand George Zimmerman be arrested in the days after Trayvon was murdered. On that March, one of our founders Ahmed, who's Palestinian war Kafia, and very early on that March, he talked about the fact that he grew up between south Florida and east Jerusalem.

From a very young age, saw the connections between what his people were experiencing in Palestine and what black people were experiencing in South Florida. He wore that, Kafia. I think that so much created a spark in the organization around just the fact that we are in this together. Black Palestinian solidarity has been a big part of the organization's history, and it didn't even necessarily come from this place of analysis or tradition, but just came from the fact that like we

⁴Jeb Bush- Former Governor of Florida, who served from 1999 to 2007.

knew Ahmed, Ahmed knew us, and just the basics of humans wanting to be a fight for each other.

So that was just foundational to the organization's history. Then a year after that, we took over the Florida capital and, for 31 days and 30 nights when we were pushing forward, this was after George Zimmerman had been acquitted, trying to push for something called Trayvon's law, which was a suit of legislation to address racism in the state of Florida and people from across Florida came together, people from across the country came together and it was a really big moment.

Rachel Gilmer: Despite us sort of having this huge moment of people coming together and as clearly being on the right side, morally, you know, we were in the halls of the capital of Florida. We saw that the people who did have power in Florida saw people like the private prison industry. We have Florida politicians taking more money from private prisons than anywhere else in the country. We saw Marion Hammer, who's one of the most notorious NRA lobbyists. So, at the end of those 30 days, we realized that we didn't have the power we needed to win the things we were trying to win. We didn't have the power to pass the Trayvon law. Florida is like Republican trifecta control. It is run by all these big corporations it's run by the far right in the billionaire class.

So that sort of experience cemented in us the need to do deep community organizing that mobilization wasn't enough to make the change happen, that we wanted to happen. That we couldn't be like a flashpoint in the pan that we needed to do deep, deep, deep community organizing.

So, we went out across the state, and we all started chapters really across the state of Florida, focusing on how we bring our communities together around these issues. It can't just be a small group of us at the Capitol. It must be thousands of us at the Capitol. So, we went out with this mission of how we bring more people along with us. Right after the capital, many of us went back to Miami and a young man named Refa Hernandez was murdered by the police.

He's a Columbia immigrant, and his, so, you know, again, this just moment of the ways that all of our communities are impacted by these issues. And I think going back and organizing in Miami, you know, we saw so many, despite so many of our communities being impacted by so many of the same issues that our communities are not United. The Jamaican community doesn't talk to the Haitian community, doesn't talk to the black American community, doesn't talk to the Latino communities.

So, we set about how do we, or our job is to unite all these communities around a shared vision because so many of us are up against the same challenges. So, in the same system of oppression. So, we set the bar a couple of years later of really building a political vision that we would unite our communities.

So through deep conversations across the state of Florida, we even did an organizing program

inside of a prison in South Florida. We built this political vision called the Freedom Papers. It is about this idea that there is abundance as possible. They tell us that there's not enough money for this community.

There's not enough money to allow immigrants to come into this country and for poor people in this country to still get their needs met. So, the freedom papers are about pushing back past that idea and the fact that there are enough resources for all of us. What would it look like if we lived in a country that made sure that people had a home to live in, food to eat, and were able to go to the doctor when they needed access to education?

All of that is possible, but our government spends money instead of locking people up waging war abroad, and deporting immigrants. The freedom papers I'll end on this is the organizing tool that we use to bring people into the movement around. So many young people might be politicized around a particular thing that they experienced in their family, and how do we get them when they join the organization to see that they're part of a bigger fight and that our liberation is bound up in one another? So very excited again, to be on the panel today and to get into a discussion with you all. Thank you again for having me.

Zoharah Simmon: Thank you so much, Rachel and I live here in Florida, and I have had the great pleasure of working with Dream Defenders. A few of your members were students of mine and of Paul's at the University of Florida. I was so excited when they started marching after Trayvon Martin was brutally killed. I saw them just really take off very much reminded me of how we in SNCC took off with the sit-ins, et cetera. So, can we all be brought together on the screen? I don't know if Maria can hear us yet. Yes. And oh, thank goodness, Maria. Oh, finally. Yes, Thank you. So, would you please go ahead with your opening, uh, comments?

Maria Verela: Well, well, thank you. Who is attending this session? It's it is our future. We really can't be solo anymore in terms of trying to change those things that crushed us, crush our children, and will be crushing their children. So, we just kind of must get over what might be some of the issues, and that then that that's done with good, solid organizing. And I think to use, um, one of the examples I wanted to talk, talk about today, which was SNCC's relationship with the United farm workers. We were, we were both organizing built around, organizing in a collaborative way, which meant listening to the community and what it was that they needed.

While we each had our charismatic leaders, what was more important was the kind of ordinary folks that were pulling this together. The West Coast is interesting in terms of doing interracial intercultural kinds of organizing, I think in some ways, because we're more neighbors to each other, or maybe there's, you know, more intermarriage or whatever it is. There's a lot of openness to these kinds of coalitions for SNCC. Let me just back up and tell you a story. I first learned about what was going on the West Coast, because we didn't have the internet and we did have our movement newspaper because the regular press wasn't covering anything that we were doing except right. So, at one of the staff meetings, I think it was late 1964. Marshall GS and Mike Miller approached me and said, we'd want to create this program where SNCC supports the farm

workers union. Cesar Chavez is very interested in nonviolent training for his staff and feels that it would be much more effective in some of the campaigns that they're doing.

So, that intrigued me. And when they presented this to the full SNCC staff, there was a lot of support. So as was noted before, some two-way radios went over to the farm workers and a couple of valances, which are good when you're being chased, because they're a very solid little six-cylinder car that will hold the road well. They were known to us in the South in many ways, saving people's lives. So, we had some surplus, and that went to the farm workers. But more importantly, they asked if SNCC would support the salaries now understand this is \$9 and 76 cents a week for SNCC staff to work full time with the union in terms of doing whatever the union wanted them to do. That was approved as well, which was interesting.

So, they talked about helping the farm workers, um, in their organizing campaigns. I think it wasn't always roses and, and, um, champagne, some people did resent people coming in from the outside to teach them how to be quote nonviolent. But I think because these folks were coming from the position of, we worked in Mississippi we've done these kinds of campaigns and what is it that you want to do and how can we help?

That's a different kind of approach to organizing. So I was approached by some of our organizers in SNCC who were working in the Mississippi Delta. This was in early 1965, and this was a two-way street between the union and SNCC because there were people who wanted to help farm workers in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia form unions.

Um, and we didn't know how to do that, but the farm workers did. So, these folks came to me one day and said, would you do a film strip on how the union organized itself, um, and was successful in some of their campaigns? So I didn't know about that. So of course, I went to California, and started learning about this amazing approach to supporting people, everything from having a credit union to funeral insurance to healthcare clinics, the very practical way that you support people so that when they decide to go out on strike, they're not just dropping off a cliff. Their families are taken care of, their food banks, and their clothing banks. So I did this strip and I did actually did a three-part film strip and brought it back to the deep south and was asked at one point to present this film strip to some farm workers from across the south that had been thrown off their plantations because they were working on voter red, or they tried to go down and register to vote and got fired.

If you get fired, that means you're out of your house. So, they were homeless. I showed this film strip to them. When I was done with it, there was this long silence. I thought, well I guess that didn't work. Then this older man got up and he had tears in his eyes. He said you don't know what it's like to feel that we are not the only ones. This is what this kind of interracial intercultural exchange is about. We change our perspectives. We understand things from a different point of view and, and, and it's energizing and it's more sustainable than kind of folding

into ourselves and only our history and only our kinds of needs because we're not going to win anything that way.

If you want to see one of those sections of the film strip, go to the SNCC digital gateway, and there's a section called Learning from Experience. Part four is part of that. I don't know how they did it. They put that film strip up and you can go through it and watch the way it was made. Those photos are mostly taken by George Ballas because at that time I was a novice, and my stuff was bad. So, George kind of saved the day by helping to create a lot of the images.

One of the things I wanted to say today was that at heart building, these coalitions are nothing but good sound, sustainable organizing. If you look at these approaches in the sixties, they did start that way, but often they were male-dominated. At that point, it works to a degree. But later, as these attempts were made in the seventies and eighties, it didn't work so well. You needed women as a part of this and their kinds of leadership assets to be speaking to each other. And in involving families in this because that is a sustainable way to keep it going through generations.

So that is one of my critiques of what was going on. I hope if you all get the chance you look at the [First Rainbow Coalition](#), it's a movie that's on our film festival and it shows you almost the nuts and bolts that went into bringing, the Young Patriots, which was a white southerner transplanted to Chicago organization of pride that flew under the Confederate flag, the Young Lords who flew under their Puerto Rican flag, but were also activists and the [Black Panthers](#) and with [Fred Hampton](#) at their leadership, I'm sorry was their leader, but the person who put this together was Bobby Lee.

Okay. The ultimate organizer that built trust did follow through didn't drop things through the crack and kept on going until he hammered out a relationship between those three groups, which threatened the political machine in Chicago to the point where they assassinated Fred Hampton. And that drove everybody white, Puerto Rican, and black underground, because that's the other issue about this kind of success as you get successful, you are going to get payback yeah. From state-sponsored terrorism to try and drive you into the ground. So, I think my final point is that this is the long haul. Fred Hampton was assassinated in 1972 in 1983, Harold Washington was elected as mayor of Chicago and broke the back of that political syndicate. He got elected because of Latino and black-and-white support for him. So, these are not short-term things.

They take a long time. In SNCC we thought we failed in 1964 when we didn't get the Mississippi delegation, the all-white Mississippi delegation displaced, and the freedom democratic party took their seats. But there were some measures passed that by 1972, there never was again, an all-white, all-male, mostly democratic party convention because the rules did not permit it. That led eventually to the election, uh, for better or for worse of [Barack Obama](#). So, I guess what I want to say for those of you who are in this and passionate about what you're doing, and the phone rings in the middle of my best point. Just remember it's for the long haul and that what you need to do is bring younger people along so that what you're doing is sustainable through generations.

Zoharah Simmons: Thank you so much. I had put together a few questions myself in case we didn't get any from our audience. Thank you so much, Maria, for telling us about those stories. I too encourage everyone to watch the film you just mentioned, which is on demand on our conference site. I looked at it last night for the first time, I certainly knew a little bit about that rainbow coalition in Chicago. I was aware that one of the reasons Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were assassinated had to do with the organizing that they were doing with blacks, whites, and Latinos. I really think everyone should watch that film. I did get one question, Maria, what's the importance of documentation written and visual to movement and coalition building?

Maria Varela: We weren't always the best documentarians. If you go through old SNCC correspondence, you will not find a date on any letter. We just weren't thinking that way. You know, we were just putting one foot in front of the other and we weren't saving very many things. I will tell you though, that when I helped with putting together this SNCC digital gateway thing, it was so important to be able to use original documents, and primary sources to see the context and the thinking.

I think we must thank [Jim Foreman](#) for this who was our executive director. He was always saying, write it down, put a date. This is history. You have to understand this is history. And he wanted it documented in both writing and photography. We were the only civil rights group that had full-time staff photographers.

There were nine of us. At one point we had two, at least two dark rooms that I know of, one in Atlanta and one right down the block for me in my house in two blue, Mississippi. We just kept shooting and shooting. Nobody really in the mainstream media wanted our stuff, but Jim [Foreman] didn't care. He said, this, we need for future generations. Now look at what's come out of it. We've had exhibits, we have this digital gateway that has these great photographs. So, I will say we weren't the best if we didn't have Mr. Foreman prodding us, we probably, would've not done much of this at all. For those of you coming up, do you want to think about those coming after you? Yes. So, you must do something about your documentation, visual and written.

I think that Rachel, maybe you can tell us, are you guys in the dream defenders? I know you're an integral part of, the movement for black lives is this happening now, documentation of everything?

Rachel Gilmer: I related to Maria's point about one foot in front of the other, and how much we haven't documented. We're turning 10 this year and I'm realizing like, wow, I wish I had kept a journal all of this time. I wish we all had. We are very grateful to be, I think we are going to get some support from SNCC to try to document the last 10 years as we head into our 10th anniversary next year. So, I feel very grateful for that, but I just want to say that the small, I mean, obviously we all could do better at documentation, but what you all did document has been so foundational for us. I mean, when Dream Defenders started doing delegations to Palestine, and then when we contributed to the movement for black lives platform, that took a

stance around Palestine, we got so much backlash. Funders who wanted to stop funding us all sorts of critiques from the right-wing Zionist media.

It caused, I think, us to start to question ourselves, like, did we overstep, were we doing the right thing and being able to go back and like, read the SNCC statement on Palestine and then read all of the documentation about the backlash you all got when you took a stance against US imperialism was like very grounding for us to know that actually we're a part of a rich legacy of solidarity. We're a part of a rich legacy of black-Palestinian solidarity. And no, we didn't misstep, anytime black people have been outspoken around Palestine or imperialism abroad, there's been backlash because they see the power in that. Yes. So, I just want to say how grateful I am for what you all, just how intentional y'all have been about writing down the history and passing down things because it's been integral for Dream Defenders and us just kind of knowing our place and feeling grounded and feeling connected to the history.

Maria Varela: Wow. That is so good to hear. Thanks

Zohorah Simmons: We had another question, directed at you Maria, any suggestions on translating the successful audio-visual tools for the Okra co-op and others into current organizing amongst the youth? Are you familiar with this okra co-op?

Maria Valera: That was my first film strip, and it was a set of two booklets. We had a very different approach to how we were going to do these kinds of materials instead of sitting down with our great college writing skills, some of us better than others. Writing out these tones about how to organize an okra co-op.

I took a tape recorder and, in those days, you're talking about a big honky tape recorder, reel to reel, up to Panola County, where a group of farmers, black farmers had organized themselves into a marketing co-op for their okra, because they were getting bad prices for what they were raising. So, what I did was I said to them, if you wanted to talk to somebody in Bogalusa, Louisiana or Gainesville Florida, wherever about how you did this, how would you explain it? So, they just went to a book chapter and verse and they told about where they made their mistakes and how they learned about, what you have to do to keep this going.

So, I just took that and transcribed it, and I just used their words and took pictures. Well, that's where I first had to, I kept bugging SNCC photographers to go with me up to Batesville to take pictures. They said, no, you do it. And I said, well, I don't know how. And they said, well, learn and here we'll tell you how to learn. So that's started my so-called photography career, which I never thought I had one. But that's what we did was we used people's words because they cut straight to the quick, they did it in such an accessible way that somebody reading this in Georgia or Alabama could relate to it because it was in their language and their kind of life's history experience.

I'm not sure I answered the question about this, but I think that that's how you reach people. You reach them where they are and if you do these days, I'm not sure, Rachel, would you guys ever

need a printed booklet, or would you end up making a video? I mean, what would be your communication approach to people in the community, if you needed to share information, for certain kinds of campaigns?

Rachel Gilmer: We do both. We're like we got to meet people online because there's a lot of people online. So how do we? The right is organizing so much online. So, we're like, how do we do videos and graphics that help reach people on the internet? We know that that is not a substitute for in-person organizing, which is the bread and butter of what we do and what else's power. So yeah, we have pamphlets and all sorts of things we hand out to people in person. The Freedom Papers, which are political vision is, is a book we hand out. So yeah, we try to do both.

Zoharah Simmons: Well, I'm getting the word that we've got about five minutes. I did have one great question and maybe I'll read it, and you can each integrate this into your closing. What are three key moments in the movement's history that brought black and brown people together that we can learn from? Maybe we can start with you Paul and integrate that into your closing statement.

Paul Ortiz: Thank you Zoharah. The 2006 general strike in the United States was the greatest general strike in the history of this hemisphere. It was black and brown people organizing together. I mean, many of my former students who are now moving up the ranks in the labor movement, especially actually Latino women organizers were integral to that 2006 general strike changed everything. Yet again, we've all forgotten it.

Sometimes when I get talks, I'll ask what's the largest general strike in US American history and people will say the hay market or something happened in the 19th century. Well, it was wonderful, but I mean, we just did this y'all. I'm just kind of beginning my Hispanic Latinx Heritage Month now lasts well into mid-November and it's getting closer every year to my black history month. In my household, the joke is black history month is the busiest day in Paul's year or Latinx History Month.

Now they kind of go together. And so the exciting thing is that community organizations, especially Latino organizations in cities like Chicago[Illinois], east Los Angeles[California], the Bronx[New York City], Queens[New York], and Seattle[WA] increasingly asked me to begin by talking about anti-black racism within Latino communities and that, the racist history of the Spanish and Portuguese and Dutch empires, which had such a big impact on our lives.

Vice versa with black history month talks increasingly the charge I get from black community organizations and black students is talk about the connections between black and brown organizing. So increasingly people are moving in this direction, but again, it's, I want to thank SNCC for really getting us on the right track and the dream defenders for keeping us moving forward. Always right. Ante.

Zoharah Simmons: Yes. Thank you, Paul. Closing remarks, Rachel.

Rachel Gilmer: I just want to reiterate what Maria said about this is just honestly good organizing and meeting communities where they're at. Building coalitions around common fights. That's just good organizing. I think my generation at times had impatience for one another and has done like the oppression Olympics. Where we're all seeing each other as the enemy, as opposed to finding solidarity, recognizing that that solidarity is going to come with struggle, but that the enemy is out there.

So, I just think it's important for us to remember to be patient with one another and know that we're all coming from different backgrounds and experiences. So that's inevitably going to lead to some sort of struggle as we're getting to know and see outside of the bubble of our own experience. But what is on the other side of that struggle is like actual power that can win real changes in our communities. So there's no shortcut to that. It's going to be messy, but it's necessary to work to organize, to build the type of power that's needed to change things.

Zohorah Simmon: Thank you so much. Uh, Maria,

Maria Valera: I think I was reflecting on what Ms. Baker [Fannie Lou Hamer] used to tell us. I remember one time she said, "You might be book-learned, but you need to shut up and she didn't use the word shut up. She was much too much of a lady to do that, but you need to be quiet and listen to the people who are life-learned because from them you will learn."

I think that's an important thing as we encourage, we know we can mobilize hundreds of thousands of people, don't we know that social media can be used to do that? There are tools that we never had, but if we can't get out of the streets into the community, all of that is not going to make the kind of change, the fundamental changes that are needed. So that's kind of like my ending and thank you all of you. So, for you to put this together and for those who are attending, we appreciate IT.

Zohorah Simmon: I keep looking at this chat and I thought we were finished, and I just have gotten the note that we have nine minutes. I'm happy that we still have some more time to talk. I have a question for all of us because I know we are all still organizers. Maria and I have not stopped organizing. Of course, Paul and Rachel are absolute organizers. But my question was considering the looming 2022 elections, what can we do to educate and mobilize black and brown voters to unify around progressive agendas and counter the right wing?

Paul Ortiz: Well one of the things Zohorah where I think movement history intersects with contemporary activism is, I know a lot of people are working on this issue but getting people active just to echo what everyone is saying, that's the most important thing, getting us moving forward. Getting us because there's so much pessimism and cynicism. The global pandemic right now has mobilized. A lot of people have put us in unfamiliar organizing settings where we must use Zoom Cloud like this. And yeah, it takes us many more hours to even have a face-to-face conversation. I think one of the things I'm trying as I'm, I'm kind of beginning to close out my Hispanic, Latin heritage month talks. I'm challenging my audiences upfront, I'm saying, what are we as so-called Hispanic or Chicano or Latino people doing about this disgraceful oppression of

Haitian refugees in the US- Mexico border?

Yeah. When we owe so much every nation of Latin America owes its freedom and independence to the sacrifices of generations of Haitian people. I mean, heck even this country, even the US during the American Revolution. The Haitian Senate volunteered a regiment of freedom fighters to support the American Revolution. What are we doing now, if we're not using Hispanic Heritage Month to argue in favor of the human rights of our comrades from Haiti, what are we doing? So, a lot of this is bearing witness refusing to forget refusing, to sweep things under the rug. Again, as I'm going around and giving these talks, I'm saying, what are we doing? I mean, why is it the mayor of Miami making a statement about this disgraceful thing that's happening to Haitians on the US-Mexico border when Haiti is such a central part of what Miami is and could be?

The last thing I mentioned is we have to break through these facades and illusions. We have too many people who run around saying that, well, we don't have a problem with racism in our communities. Now I'm talking personally, I'm talking about the Latinx community. That I'm a part of, we say, oh the Spanish were much more progressive than the Dutch or the British about race that's BS. If anything, they are even worse in many ways. So, we've got, I remember when I first moved down to Florida and I started giving talks to Miami Dade high schools and in different places, I had a bunch of students tell me, well we were told Professor Ortiz by our teachers that the Spanish were kind conquerors, and they had respect for indigenous and African cultures. And I said, "Who told you that that's a lie?"

I'm here to tell you let's get reeducated. You know? So, there are a lot of people calling me to organize workshops on this issue of coalition building. The first thing I tell them is you can't form a coalition with people across the street from you unless you know your history, especially who your ancestors were in the struggle.

When I talked to Cuban American audiences who was Antonio Mateo, who was Maximo Gomez, who were the women who fought during the Cuban world liberation in the 1860s. If you don't know those basic things about your own people's histories, it's very hard to ask you to then go across the street and form a coalition with other folks. So, I'm biased. I'm a history professor. I admit it it's my it's a sin, but I think history is so critical. Zohorah.

Zoharah Simmon: I agree. We had a wonderful last question. Maybe Maria you might want to address this since you do work with Indigenous people a question came in, how do Indigenous people fit into this coalition building that we're talking about?

Maria Valera: Well, I don't think they just merely fit in. I mean, of course, I live in the Southwest. There is such a strong indigenous movement in a whole lot of areas. The longest group that has bought uranium mining, which has decimated families across New Mexico, and

Arizona has been Native Americans. They've taken the point that the young folks are getting people out and registering them to vote and not involve native Americans. Of course, it's all, what's geography?

There are places where that might be a moot point. There are other places where if you don't have native Americans as part of your coalition, then you don't have a coalition, right? So, it is again like Paul was saying, we need to learn each other's histories. We shouldn't assume that a coalition is going to make a big change.

If we, if I can't learn Haitian history and Haitians can't learn, you know, the history of Mexicans in the Southwest, we have to find a way to do that. I have found that history can light a fire under people when they know real history. It will often just light a fire under them and make them think critically so differently than before they found out about, you know, real history such as what Paul Wright did. So I don't know if I answered the question, but it's, it is geography that plays a large role in how we fashion these kinds of coalitions.

Zoharah Simmon: To you, Rachel, we're down here in Florida and we have a very large Latinx population. Uh, we have the Cuban Americans, we have, uh, the Venezuelans and unfortunately, they are often, uh, on the right and voting against all the progressive issues. What are you and the dream defenders doing or thinking about doing with that community? Or is it just hopeless?

Rachel Gilmer: Yeah, it's scary because we're seeing that the right is trying to figure out despite the Browning of America and black and brown people becoming the majority in this country. White men know their days being their days being numbered. They're trying to figure out how to maintain control in the face of that. So, they're doing all sorts of disinformation campaigns, targeting Latino communities, and trying to move these communities more and more to the right. It's scary.

We're lucky to be a part of a coalition in Florida. That's trying to figure out how we are doing the deep organizing together, to bring communities together across differences, to be able to build the type of coalition necessary to transform the state, but there are no shortcuts to that work. The right during the pandemic, when we weren't canvassing, because we wanted to keep people safe, the Trump people were out there talking to people and bringing more people under their umbrella.

So, it's just really important, there are no shortcuts to the slow, deeply organized work of bringing people together. Fighting against this disinformation and bringing people onto our agenda. So that's all I can say is we're trying to get out there and talk to people and be in coalition with other organizations who have the same.

Zoharah Simmon: Yes. I know how difficult it is. Paul lives in Florida, have any ideas Paul about

Paul Ortiz: Just keep, you know, keep on, you know, keep the faith. I mean, we're all doing

good work we're but to just remind each other, we're under siege to give each other a break sometimes to, to be sympathetic, you know, uh, just to listen. Listening is the most important skill for an organizer. That's what I learned in the UFW [United Farm Workers Union] that's what I learned from SNCC time and time again, listening.

Zoharah Simmon: Well, thank you to Maria Varela, Paul Ortiz, and Rachel Giler. Thank you so much for being on this black and brown model of the organizing panel. I'm so happy that the four of us already know each other and are working together and will continue working together to build these coalitions, to build the kinds of them, really the kind of country that America has never been but surely can be. Yes. Thank you so much.