

Breathing Life into Dem Dry Bones with Apologies to Ezekiel
A Short History of the Peoples' 14 Point Agenda and the HK on J Peoples' General Assembly
Al McSurely, Chair, Legal Redress Committee, NC NAACP, 11/15/08

November 4th, 2008 changed America. The undeniable arithmetic of the Obama Movement changed both the political and social realities on the ground. This new reality on the ground changes the way people perceive and think about each other, about our problems, and about our possible solutions.

Our ground is North Carolina. We know this ground. We work in North Carolina's vineyards where the grapes of wrath are stored. We drink both the good and bad wines from them.

Three years ago, in the discouraging Spring and Summer of 2005, long before Sen. Obama announced, in the backwoods vineyards of North Carolina, a young minister from Goldsboro, a big man, a prophet, painfully carried his mighty frame into scores of NAACP Branch meetings at churches and recreation centers across the state, with a prophetic vision of hope. He audaciously told his African American sisters and brothers we can achieve better schools, better houses, better jobs, and better health care by taking three steps: re-dedicating themselves to the 97-year-old NAACP; electing the prophet to the NAACP State Presidency; and reaching out to unlikely partners to rebuild the mighty anti-racism, anti-poverty and anti-war Movement of the 1960's. In October of 2005, people from rural counties in the Black Belt and from the cities in the Piedmont, civil rights warriors from over 60 branches across North Carolina, rose before dawn on a Saturday morning, piled into old and new cars, and drove as long as seven hours to a big fancy hotel in Greensboro where the NAACP Annual State Convention was held.

These soldiers had carried the blood-stained banner of freedom for years in their home counties. They did not care about the fancy hotel and the banquets and the fawning over politicians who had regularly used the NAACP's infrastructure to get elected, and then went to Jones Street and compiled perfect vote records of betrayal of the interests of poor and working people. The NAACP civil rights warriors knew what they wanted--strong leadership and support in their daily struggles to save their children from the meat-grinder school systems, from the racist court systems, from the costly and confusing health systems, and the ever-shrinking job systems. They voted overwhelmingly for the Big Prophet from Goldsboro--Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II.

The status quo forces in the NAACP were shocked when the results were posted Saturday afternoon. Rev. Barber, Ms. Carolyn Coleman, Rev. Curtis Gatewood and many other proven activists won by almost a 60-40 margin. Recall how you felt at 11:02 p.m. Eastern Standard Time on November 4th, 2008 when all the networks announced: "Barack Obama is the next President of the United States." That's how many civil rights warriors felt when it was announced in October 2005: "Rev. Barber is the President of the North Carolina NAACP."

Rev. Barber quickly appointed a leadership group that shared his vision. During the first part of 2006, he reached out to the members who had supported his opponent. His Goldsboro support team drove him literally 50,000 miles across the state, speaking at every church and Branch meeting that would have him, about rebuilding the moribund anti-racism movement. In the fall of 2006, the NAACP leadership committee considered a bold proposal to invite other progressive organizations that were predominantly white to join the NAACP in a massive People's Assembly in Raleigh on the Saturday nearest the NAACP's 98th birthday, February 12, 2007. Our aim was radical. To put forth a Peoples' Agenda that would challenge lawmakers' entrenched habit of doing business for business. The new coalition would demand: Do the Peoples' Business for the People.

After much debate, the NAACP leadership voted unanimously to sponsor the "Historic Thousands on Jones Street" Peoples' Assembly. This was quickly shortened to HKonJ. We did not want to set a number—some proposed 50,000 and some proposed 2,000, so we agreed on "Historic." But we wanted to convey this was a grass-roots movement of the people, by the people, and for the people. This wasn't just a couple of lobbyists, going over to Jones Street with policy papers, begging for some crumbs for poor people. This was a Peoples' Lobby. Marching on the Peoples' House on Jones Street.

Rev. Barber gathered the best thinking to help write the 14-Point Agenda. We were guided by several principles. First, in its essence, it must be anti-racist. Past efforts to build broad Black-White fusion movements had always collapsed when racist appeals to the white sections of the alliance were made as the struggle heated up. We wanted our white friends to know from the get-go that the Peoples' Agenda was centered on dismantling the system of racism—the institutional legacies of slavery and Jim Crow that insidiously replicate themselves in our daily lives.

Second, the agenda had to be against poverty. The NAACP and its progressive partners, by definition, fight for the poor ... the least of these ... the disenfranchised ... the mis-educated ... the imprisoned ... the hungry ... the homeless. The shortest war in U.S. History was the war on poverty! Declared in late 1964, mortally wounded in 1966 when Governors got the veto power over any anti-poverty program in their states, and put to death in 1969 by Nixon's hatchet man, Donald Rumsfeld. This righteous war must be declared again—with long-term commitments, lots more money, and millions of troops fighting for good jobs, living wages, decent health care, decent housing, and new hope for the increasing number of sisters and brothers of all colors who are broke. Today, the politically expedient language is to talk about the problems of the "middle class." It's not popular to advocate for the poor. Prophets don't care about what's popular. Prophets care about what's right. Prophets teach about reducing fear and poverty.

And third, the Peoples' Agenda had to be against the unjust war in Iraq. We learned from the trap that was laid for Dr. King and other civil rights leaders who had remained silent for years about the U.S. Government's immoral, murderous invasion of the sovereign nation of Vietnam. When Dr. King finally, in 1967, eloquently spoke out against our government's racist occupation of Vietnam, the Movement's enemies used this to create divisions within the Movement and the Democratic Party. Rev. Barber has studied this history carefully. He chose to

be up-front. That's why there are three pillars to the HKonJ Movement: anti-racism, anti-poverty, and anti-war.

On Thanksgiving Saturday in November 2006, leaders of the Sweet Sixteen organizations came to Goldsboro for the first Peoples' Assembly meeting. Rev. Barber's text that morning was from the prophet Ezekiel's experience in the valley full of dry bones. I paraphrase slightly Ezekiel 37:

And the Lord told Ezekiel to say to the bones: 'O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. . . I will cause breath to enter into you. I will lay sinews upon you. I will bring up flesh upon you and cover you with skin. And ye shall live.' Ezekiel did as the Lord told him to do. Behold, there was a noise, and a shaking and the bones came together. But, Ezekiel saw, *there was no breath in them*. And the Lord told Ezekiel to say to the wind, 'Come from the four winds, O Breath, and breathe upon these slain, so they may live.' And behold, the breath came into them, and they lived, and they stood upon their feet, and they were an exceeding great army.

Starting two years ago, the HKonJ idea has captured the four winds of the state. It has breathed the sacred spirit of a Black-Brown-White community-of-action into the dry bones of many single-issue, often single-race, organizations. The Sweet 16 is now the Sweet 86. The 4,000 member army gathered on February 9, 2007 doubled to 8,000 on February 10th, 2008. On February 14th, 2009 we expect it to grow again, either arithmetically to 12,000, or geometrically to 16,000. And we will be back the next year. Like Ezekiel's dry bones, we are becoming an exceeding great army.

Those who would block and divide us. . . those who would try to stop our long march to freedom, equality and justice. . . they have refined their divisive tricks over the past 40 years. But their fundamental tactic remains the same: aggravate, scratch, and claw away at the old racial fault lines in our society. They believe our white sisters and brothers are still vulnerable to direct and indirect appeals to the racist stereotypes that have been carefully planted in all of our minds, unconsciously associated with most men's (and some women's) sexist and homophobic anxieties. Since 1965 in the wake of the Goldwater wipeout, the racists that owned and controlled the old Democratic Party of the South have renamed their political vehicle as the Republican party and used that to daily hammer away their splitting lies in what some of call the neo-Jim Crow mass culture. The tactics of the Atwater-Rove advertising agencies are simple: saturate the television screens in Black peoples' homes with subliminal lies about uppity women, gays and Latinos, implying they pose direct and indirect threats to Black families and Black churches. Recognizing that they had to peel off 20-25% of the ever-increasing Black vote, the Rove strategy was to hypocritically promote anti-abortion, anti strong women, and anti-gay fake issues. Most of the Republican leadership does not care at all about these issues, but it is the only way they can possibly get poor and working white and a few Black voters to vote for their right wing candidates.

But the Right wing's main weapon—tried and true since it created the KKK after the civil war, is to flash daily images of Black men in orange jump suits who are out to kill and rape your mother, take your jobs, take college slots away from your darling children, and who may want to marry your daughter, making everyone a multi-racial person like Barack Obama.

That brings us back to where we started. The Obama victory places these splitters and their lies in perspective. The splitters are losers. Their lies are increasingly transparent. When Sarah Palin called Obama a terrorist, a socialist, a big liberal taxer, a man who wanted to teach kindergarten children about sex, and all the other lies McCain's people handed her to read, she quickly was exposed as a loser. Her lies were dismissed by all but what the media called "The Republican Base"—that is the ever-decreasing pool of fearful white people, many in the South, who have made public commitments to fight the reality of a diverse America. Palin's ignorance and lies were exposed in a minute. The Bush-Rumsfeld-Cheney lies, costing the world millions of lives, trillions of dollars, and priceless honor, are still taking their toll.

We in the NAACP, the oldest and baddest civil rights organization in the world, with a hundred years experience of dealing with these lies of the splitters, believe that the HKonJ coalition of 86 partners (and growing) is strategically positioned to tackle the job of healing these false divisions and suspicions. We have learned from experience that doing things together, eating together, praying together, getting to know each other in joint struggles for the common good of all people, is the best balm for aching dry bones. We know that challenging the old way of doing business in Raleigh and in Washington will bring new, sometimes unlikely, partners into our growing circle of trust and hope.

Our 14 Point Agenda can serve as the basis for an exciting Movement that cannot be divided. Please study it carefully in your Sunday Schools, your clubs, your unions, and other associations. Help us build Local Peoples' Assemblies to spread the word about the Agenda, about the annual show of power in Raleigh called HKonJ, and to train new political leaders to take up the fight at the local level for the Peoples Agenda. We need 500 new local leaders to run for office. Many members of the House of Representatives in Raleigh had no opposition this time. A Local Peoples' Assembly member who had the support of, say, 50 Black, Brown and White voters in a House District could be a viable candidate in practically any District. The best way to get a politician's support for any legislation is to be able to make a credible threat that you are seriously considering running someone against him or her the next election. Most politicians are aware, more than we are, that their political base is thin and thinner.

This time around, as we rebuild our Movement, we will not be split or stopped. This time around, our dry bones are going to keep walking around, building an exceeding great army of people whose ancestors worked this land for centuries before immigrants from Europe, slaves from Africa, and people looking for work from Asia and Latin America all got together at the beginning of the 21st Century and decided they would risk working with each other to dismantle the systems of militarism, racism and poverty and create a new society based on respect, love and productive work.