



REUTERS/YURI GRIPAS

Antiwar activists stand in protest of the war in Iraq during rush hour at Union Station in Washington.

WHERE'S THE **COLOR** IN THE ANTIWAR MOVEMENT?

Organizers connect the war abroad to the one at home.

by Momo Chang

THE OCCUPATION IN IRAQ is going on its sixth year and so are the antiwar demonstrations. While people of color can be seen at the demonstrations, it remains largely a white movement. But in a war where people of color and working-class communities are impacted the most (\$720 million dollars spent on the war each day) some activists are asking, as Betita Martinez did many years ago about the World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in Seattle: where is the color in the antiwar movement?

Organizers of color in the movement acknowledge that the movement itself does not have the broadest support in the United States. But they cite other reasons for the absence of people of color, specifically that many activists of color are already organizing on multiple fronts, from housing to education and jobs. And if they work for a nonprofit, then funding, time and energy are likely limited to specific issues. Still, organizers like Rama Kased with the Arab Resource and Organizing Center in San Francisco recognize other dynamics as well. "It's always been a challenge to get a Palestine-centered [agenda]" in the movement, said Kased, a Palestinian American who grew up in Brooklyn. "Because it's easy to be, 'I'm against the war. I'm against killing people.' But when it gets down to

the nitty-gritty of human rights or Palestine or all this other stuff, they start stepping back."

Over the years, Kased has organized with other people of color in the antiwar movement in Brooklyn, New York, and in the San Francisco Bay Area. Palestine, education equity, Black liberation and queer rights are among the issues they've brought to the table. While many antiwar groups have been supportive, she said, they do little to actually work against the deep-rooted problems of racism and economic injustice.

Army veteran Eli PaintedCrow is disillusioned with the war, the military and the antiwar movement. Coming back from Iraq, she recalls facing racism in antiwar organizations. "It's mostly run by white males [and] continues to oppress people of color and women," PaintedCrow said, referring to the mainstream antiwar movement. "Because if they didn't, you'd see more people of color in the movement."

More organizers of color are trying now to connect the war abroad to the issues facing their members. This is especially visible in San Francisco, where opposition to the war has been more vocal than in other cities.

Steve Williams, executive director of People Organized to Win Employment Rights (a.k.a. POWER), cofounded

the nonprofit 11 years ago to focus on welfare rights in the predominantly Black Bayview/Hunters Point neighborhood in San Francisco. There was some doubt at first about how they would connect antiwar work to their anti-gentrification agenda and to organizing Latina domestic workers. But they found many links. The kids of the approximately 600 members in the organization are constantly bombarded with messages of militarism. Corporations that are building the wall along the U.S.-Mexico border are some of the same ones profiting from the war in Iraq, Williams said.

The first goal of POWER's antiwar campaign is to kick the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps out of San Francisco's public schools, which is an issue that members can get behind. The talk of the town in Black communities is not about how the military will give people better opportunities, but about how they can keep their kids from enlisting, Williams said. In the army alone, the percentage of Blacks has remained steady at about 21 percent since the mid-1980s, while the percentages of Asians and Latinos in the army have shot up.

"Increasingly, there's less tolerance in the [Black] community to allow the U.S. government to treat us as second-class citizens and to risk our lives at the same time," Williams said, noting the government's failure after Hurricane Katrina as a key turning point.

For some communities, joining the antiwar movement has been easier. The Filipino group BAYAN USA brings many Filipinos to antiwar demonstrations in major U.S. cities and is known for their colorful chants. The U.S. chapter is linked to the Philippines-based BAYAN, which calls for a true democracy there.

Since the U.S. declared the Philippines a second front in the War on Terror and targeted a Muslim group there, Filipinos have seemed more aware of how the war touches their community. BAYAN USA has also been pivotal in organizing people of color in antiwar marches such as Strength in Unity in San Francisco, an anti-imperialist, people of color contingent.

Following Sept. 11, Prof. Mari Matsuda at Georgetown University Law Center cofounded D.C. Asians for Peace and Justice, a group that is now inactive. She also started teaching a peacemaking course at the law school.

"Every single one of us has war in our genealogy as Asian Americans, and we can use that historical memory of what war did to our countries to oppose the war," Matsuda said. Japanese-American groups were among the first to reach out to the Muslim and Arab communities following Sept. 11 because of the history of Japanese internment during World War II.

One of the reasons that soldiers were able to napalm and bayonet babies in Vietnam was because they didn't see Asians as human, Matsuda said. Similar things are happening in Iraq today.

The group Mujeres Unidas y Activas, a Latina organization in San Francisco and Oakland, is also trying to organize their members—mostly household workers—around the war. Claudia Reyes believes that the war abroad is linked to the onslaught of immigration raids. Militarism, war and poverty caused by wars are all root causes of migration, she said. Most of the women in their organization came to the country because of wars in Central America supported by the U.S.

Organizers say it's crucial to link the war abroad to the domestic war against people of color and other disenfranchised communities here at home, but this alone might not bridge the gap with the larger movement.

"We need to see more organizations do outreach to people of color," said Kevin Ramirez of the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors in Philadelphia, adding that antiwar activists need to start going to police brutality and death penalty rallies to link the issues of U.S. militarism abroad to the ones here at home. Founded by white peace activists shortly after the end of World War II, the Central Committee was one of the few white-led organizations to connect racism at home with the Vietnam War during the mass mobilizations of the 1960s and '70s. Today, the organization is led by people of color. Among their current publications is *AWOL!*, a counter-military magazine that targets youth of color.

Some organizers say that while it is clear that the public face of the current antiwar movement is too pale and male, the deeper problem is that the antiwar movement hasn't been able to develop a broad base of support in *any* community.

"Even though the mobilizations are big, they have to be bigger," said Berna Ellorin of BAYAN USA. "In order for the U.S. antiwar movement to even break ground at this point, it needs to build the broadest and most uniform front here in the U.S., and we're not at this stage."

Williams believes that mass appeal might come if the movement broadens its agenda. "The antiwar movement has missed an opportunity to say how much this war is based on racism," he said. "This war is just as much about race as it is about oil. We have a place as working-class people and people of color to play a leadership role in this movement to end the war." ■

Momo Chang is a writer and proud mama based in Oakland, CA.