

FROM THE MASSES, TO THE MASSES

BY KILMORE AND JOHN ALBERT



A SUMMATION OF THE
OCTOBER 22 COALITION'S
RESISTANCE TO POLICE
BRUTALITY IN THE
LATE 1990S

WRITTEN SUMMER 2019

*DEDICATED IN REMEMBRANCE OF NICHOLAS HEYWARD, SR.,
A FIERCE FIGHTER IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST POLICE VIOLENCE*

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A FAMILIAR STORY GAINS TRACTION

Eric Garner, 43, in Staten Island, NY, 2014. Michael Brown, 18, in Ferguson, MO, 2014. Laquan McDonald, 17, in Chicago, IL, 2014. Tamir Rice, 12, in Cleveland, OH, 2014. Walter Scott. Freddie Gray. Alton Sterling. Philando Castile....

Over the past five years, the number of high-profile murders at the hands of police has drawn national attention to the epidemic of police violence and the treatment of Black people in the United States (US). While the particular role played by police in the oppression of Black people has been ongoing—a story told and retold with painstaking articulation in urban uprisings from Watts in 1965 to Baltimore in 2015—only recently have a significant number of petty-bourgeois and white people become familiar with it, newly “woke” to the sheer volume of incidents of brutality and murder perpetrated by police. Furthermore, only a select few cases were given coverage by mainstream media throughout the years, while today the epidemic nature of police violence is being more widely reported.

In response to these outrages and to their revelation of a systemic issue, hundreds of thousands have taken to the streets demanding justice, giving rise to a movement against unchecked police terror and violence. While noteworthy, this is hardly the first incident of organized resistance to oppressive policing; the central, founding tenet of the Black Panther Party (BPP) at the time of its inception in 1966, for example, was to protect the Black community of Oakland, California from the continuous abuse visited upon it by law enforcement (as is evident in the BPP’s original name: the Black Pan-



The October 22 Coalition logo.

ther Party for Self-Defense). To that end, Panthers would conduct armed patrols in order to monitor police and intervene were they to witness officers engaging in brutality and other misconduct. In a word, the long and storied history of police violence is punctuated by instances of organized resistance to it, which brings us nearer the subject of our piece.

With the Great Migrations of Black people into Northern cities from the rural South in the 20th century, police and prisons replaced lynch mobs as the primary instruments through which social control and white supremacy are enforced. In the decades that followed, Black communities throughout the US bore the brunt of the increased focus on preserving “law and order” through mass incarceration and militarized policing, most notably as part of the ongoing War on Drugs initially waged by President Richard Nixon in 1971. This, coupled with the demand for more police to repress a population struggling with the anger and despair that accompanied the deindustrialization of cities across the US, gave rise to an epidemic of police violence. Enter the October 22 Coalition to Stop Police Brutality, Repression, and the Criminalization of a Generation (O22).

Formed in 1996 by a coalition of family members of those slain by law enforcement (henceforth referred to as *families*), revolutionaries, and seasoned activists—many of whom were veterans of political struggles during the 1960s and ’70s—O22 sought to bring

national attention to the epidemic of police violence and empower those most deeply affected by it through grassroots organizing efforts. Though its history is not widely known, O22's impact on the struggle against police brutality was substantial, and is worthy of exploration and summation. It is our hope that doing so will be of value to groups and individuals in the movement today, a movement that emerged from knowledge of an epidemic that O22 was the first to document.

In order to better understand its history and the effect it had on those involved, over the course of our research into O22, we conducted interviews with families and activists who are knowledgeable of—and were crucial to—its day-to-day functioning and strategic planning process, especially at its height from 1996-2000. Due to a dearth of coverage of people's struggles by mainstream media outlets in the US, for further details and insights, we turned to old issues of *Revolutionary Worker*, the official newspaper and “voice” of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA (RCP), which consistently covered O22's development during those years. While those who are familiar with the RCP today might be surprised to learn that, in years past, it undertook considerable efforts to unite broad sections of people in the struggle against police brutality, that does not discount—nor should it obfuscate—the important role that the RCP played in that struggle, especially through its work with O22.

ADDRESSING THE EPIDEMIC

According to its website, the seed of what would become O22:

came out of conversations among Pam Africa (International Concerned Family and Friends of Mumia Abu Jamal and MOVE), Akil Al-Jundi (Community Self Defense Program), Angel Cervantes (Four Winds Student Movement), Omowale Clay (December 12th Movement), Carl Dix (Revolutionary Communist Party) and Keith McHenry (Food Not Bombs). These conversations centered on the need to meet the intensifying nationwide epidemic of police brutality with resistance on the national level.¹

1 “History and Background of October 22 Coalition,” <http://october22.org/history>.



Protesters carry a Stolen Lives banner in Ferguson, 2014, after the murder of Michael Brown by police.

The group then determined that the first step should be to establish and popularize a National Day of Protest to Stop Police Brutality, Repression, and the Criminalization of a Generation (NDP) of predominantly Black youth. “Conferences were held in Los Angeles [(LA), California] and New York City [(NYC), New York] in June of 1996 to begin the organizing effort for NDP 1996,” reads the O22 website, and while October 22 grew in significance as a result of this effort, the date itself “did not have a significance in its own right.... The groups involved wanted to have it in October, because students would be back in school, and before the elections, so that people could have a way to express themselves in the streets.”²

Two activists with whom we spoke described how they became aware of and involved with O22, as well as offering their perspectives on its overall purpose. Kathie Cheng is an activist and educator whose first foray into political life came in the wake of the February, 2000 acquittal of the four police officers indicted in the murder of Amadou Diallo.³ “I happened to hear the verdict on the radio,” Cheng says, “and even though I wasn’t following [the case intently],

html (accessed May 1, 2019).

² *Ibid.*

³ Amadou Diallo was a 23-year-old immigrant from Guinea who was murdered by police outside of his apartment in the Bronx, New York on February 4, 1999. He was unarmed and holding his wallet when police fired 41 rounds, 19 of which struck Diallo.

I kind of knew a little bit about what happened, ...and I'm just like, *'Really?! Seriously?!'* How can they *not* be guilty?!" Compelled to action, she soon met O22 organizers Nicholas Heyward, Sr. (the father of 13-year-old Nicholas Heyward, Jr., who was murdered by police while playing cops and robbers with friends in September, 1994 in Brooklyn, New York), RCP supporter Steve Yip, and others from associated groups who invited her to attend her first O22 meeting. Despite her lack of experience in activism, Cheng would become deeply involved with O22 after witnessing its ability to bring broad sections of people together in such a meaningful way, devoting much of her time over the next decade to coordinating and organizing efforts. O22 and the Stolen Lives Project (SLP) are the subjects of her PhD dissertation, "The Stolen Lives Project Online: A Digital Humanities Project."

"I see O22 as having the mission of ensuring that there's at least one day a year when people will remember that police brutality, repression, and criminalization is a serious problem," Cheng says, "and there are a lot of people who are not willing to stand for it." She believes O22 helped:

remind people that there is [an option] to take this position [of resistance], 'cause some people don't see it as an option.... Not having that voice...would have been a lot more detrimental. You would have people just resigned to "This is the way things are; there's nothing we can do about it...." People still think that, ...but if we didn't have some vocal, visible opposition to the kind of violence that's afflicted on people, things would be a lot worse.... Keeping police brutality in the spotlight, ...making sure people don't forget that this is a problem ...[that] this is something that needs to stop ...is important and necessary.

Efia Nwangaza is a former lawyer and "lifelong human rights advocate" raised by her parents in the Garveyite tradition. As early as age 13, she has been politically active, beginning in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and eventually gravitating toward the more radical sides of the Black Power and Civil Rights Movements, working with the Student Nonviolent Coord-

minating Committee and the Revolutionary Action Movement. She is a founding member of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement for Self-Determination. Nwangaza first heard of O22 during an emergency march in South Carolina called for by the Center for Constitutional Rights, where she met Monica Shay, a lead O22 organizer. “[Shay] and other folks...had this humongous banner that had all these names on it...of people who had been murdered by the cops across the country,” says Nwangaza, “and that was my reaction too.... [This wasn’t] just some flare-up that was occurring here in...upstate South Carolina; ...it was a national problem, and...something had to be done about it.” Nwangaza became involved, eventually becoming a part of O22’s National Executive Committee.

Addressing O22’s intent and purpose, she says:

The original conception was to address police violence and to empower the people who were most directly impacted to be able to [defend] themselves and each other, and to work with those of us who had a more sophisticated reading of the system to be able to support them, to politicize and develop them, and to...attack the system in a more sophisticated kind of way.

Nwangaza continues, opining that leading members of O22—most notably the RCP—had:

the ability to recognize...that police violence was a symptom of state repression, and it was not being recognized or addressed, and as a result of that, came to recognize the need to come to the aid of that sector of the community. At that point in time, when somebody got arrested—especially in poor communities (Black, Latino, even poor white communities)—there was an assumption that the cops were right and that the person must have done something wrong. And there was a shame [to being arrested] that during the Civil Rights Movement had been challenged.... [There] was some destigmatization that had occurred during that time, but it had began to fall back in place, because the objects of the abuse were not middle-class kids dressed in their Sunday best. They were working class, poor, dependent members of the community that were the subject of these abuses, and that the traditional civil rights organizations did not cotton to.

THE NATIONAL DAY OF PROTEST: WEAR BLACK, FIGHT BACK

The original and overarching mission of O22 was to bring together broad sections of people to resist police violence by means of establishing and maintaining a national day of protest on October 22: the NDP. According to the Mission Statement of the NDP on O22's website:

The [NDP] was initiated by a diverse coalition of organizations and individuals. We came together out of our concern that the peoples' resistance to Police Brutality needed to be taken to a higher level nationwide.

The [NDP] aims to bring forward a powerful, visible, national protest against police brutality and the criminalization of a generation. It aims to expose the state's repressive program. It aims to bring forward those most directly under the gun of Police Brutality AND to also reach into all parts of the society—bringing forward others to stand in the fight against this official brutality. And the [NDP] aims to strengthen the peoples' organized capacity for resistance in a variety of ways.⁴

The character of the NDP was markedly different than that of most other protests, both then and now. Even in cities as populous as LA and NYC, one is bound to see familiar faces in the course of attending the many more-ritualized protests and rallies these metropolitan centers host. Events generally attract a predictable slew of petty-bourgeois forces whose relative freedom and intellectual training have drawn them into political life. Rarely, however, does one see anything approaching a strong showing from those living at the bottom of society—a *proletarian* presence.⁵ While there are no-

⁴ "History and Background of October 22 Coalition," last modified July 13, 2015, <http://october22.org/history.html> (accessed May 1, 2019).

⁵ "Proletarian" here and throughout the course of this article refers to the character or membership of the proletariat: a class comprised of those with "nothing to lose but their chains." For a detailed analysis and explanation of the proletariat today, see Kenny Lake's four-part series, "The Specter that Still Haunts: Locating a Revolutionary Class within Contemporary Capitalism-Imperialism," which is

table exceptions, such as the unrest that followed the police killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland in 2015, the proletariat is generally under-represented at political demonstrations. The NDP subverted this tendency, providing a platform for those most affected by police violence and state repression. Quetzal, a revolutionary communist who worked closely with the RCP at the time and served as a lead coordinator and organizer for O22's Student/Youth Network, describes this approach and discusses its appeal among that class of people:

There was just this sense that...never in their lives was there [any other] chance for them to tell their stories.... So the fact that there was a spotlight [on police brutality], and [it] was something that [other people could] hear about, and...that they would be welcome was something that hadn't happened before.... This [was] something that really spoke to their day-to-day life experience....

The outreach that we did was also different, because...all these organizations that were part of this Coalition [were] important, but their base was not the proletariat. Their base was the church-going people, or the movement people, ...or the unions, and all that, and they were very important. We actually struggled with a lot of people to go back to their base and bring them forward, 'cause you actually need that. That made a huge difference—for preachers to be preaching about [the NDP] on Sundays and [asking] their congregations to come, or for the unions to come, or for teachers—all those other people to come. The [RCP] was focused on really bringing forward the proletariat, so we went to them.... I think the proletariat found a voice in O22.

Attendees of the NDP would find themselves surrounded by a sea of people clad in black—a show of solidarity with those families mourning the loss of loved ones at the hands of police. Punctuating the monochromatic solemnity of black clothing, many wore yellow enamel pins with the art of Dread Scott, portraying the figure of a police officer shooting another figure whose hands are raised in compliance and reading, “Danger: Police in Area.” Throughout

currently available in full at www.revolutionary-initiative.com and will be printed in kites #1-4.



Scott's *Sign of the Times*, which featured prominently on the NDP.

the country, a coalition of academics, activists, artists, community and religious leaders, lawyers, and more stood with the oppressed, emboldening them to share their stories of routine brutality, harassment, and murder by law enforcement. In some cities, members of opposing gangs would call for cease-fires and an easing of tensions, citing a common enemy in the police, who some see as the largest, most violent street gang in the US. Rap and spoken word artists performed their works flanked by long banners displaying the names of thousands of people killed by US law enforcement. Speakers, all-too-conscious of the fact that they were being monitored by police, would defiantly chant “Fuck the police!” and openly refer to them as “murderers” and “pigs.” In a word, the NDP fostered an atmosphere of honesty—of unfiltered anger and anguish—while providing attendees from disparate sections of society the opportunity to stand together in their resolve to stop police brutality and repression.

Every city is unique, and so too was every city's NDP. An article in *Revolutionary Worker* described the atmosphere and character of the NDP in LA in 2000, when the Ramparts scandal revealing wide-

spread police corruption was fresh in people's minds:⁶

The low wail of a conch shell pierced the afternoon skies and drum beats rolled down Broadway as 50 Aztec dancers led the way for the 5th [NDP] in [LA]—2,500 determined people were headed for [Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD)] headquarters at Parker Center. Before the day was over, the march was attacked by LAPD cops on horses, cops and riot squads firing concussion grenades and rubber bullets and beating people with clubs. But not even this brutal attack could shut down the day, as people fearlessly stood their ground and kept the rally going.

Overwhelmingly young and militant, the marchers were all nationalities and backgrounds, and each brought their own flavor to the mix. Many were new to resistance or had just gotten involved during the protests at the Democratic National Convention (DNC) this summer.⁷ The strong proletarian character of the crowd, and so many diverse people dressed in Black, gave an edge to the march—a sense that a new kind of resistance is taking root.

People who live every day under the gun of the police brought their courage, their desire to put an end to this oppression, and their contempt for the system. Hundreds of immigrant proletarians lined the street, as the contingent from Pico-Union, a large immigrant barrio policed by the Rampart division of the LAPD, marched with a huge banner—calling attention to the police brutality and corruption scandal that has rocked LA for months; “La Pico-Union Bajo la bota de Ram-

6 The Ramparts scandal of the late '90s involved more than 70 police officers associated with the Rampart Division's Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums anti-gang unit that operated in Pico-Union and other neighborhoods west of Downtown LA. Among the laundry list of crimes at the heart of the scandal, officers were implicated in bank robbery, beatings, murders, planting false evidence, and stealing and distributing narcotics, making it one of the largest and most notorious cases of police corruption and misconduct in US history.

7 The 2000 DNC drew tens of thousands of protesters, many of whom were attacked by police wielding pepper spray and firing rubber bullets and tear gas canisters after their gathering within a permitted protest zone was declared an unlawful assembly. The attack, which was broadly criticized, inspired many people to become more politically involved, especially in the struggle against police brutality.

part, *Vidas Robadas, Vidas Arruinadas, Jamás olvidaremos, Jamás perdonaremos*” (Pico-Union Under Rampart, Stolen Lives, Ruined Lives, We will never forget, We will never forgive). The Watts Drum Corps and a young girls’ drill team set the beat, as the infectious chant from the Watts Committee Against Police Brutality echoed up and down the march: “Who Let the Pigs Out? Oink, Oink, Oink, Oink!”⁸

In Cleveland, Ohio that same year, protesters motivated by a rash of police killings—most notably that of 19-year-old Marsean Scott only days prior—and suspicious hangings in local jails gathered for the NDP at Luke Easter Park in the city’s predominantly Black, proletarian East Side, and then marched onto the front lawn of the Fourth District police station. Undeterred by the fact that the city had not granted them a permit to protest, Cleveland’s O22 organizers, including Art McCoy of Black on Black 2000, mobilized the local masses to stand together in defiance of police terror. Amongst them were friends of Scott, who marched full of pain and indignation. Upon reaching the police station’s front lawn, community members and families shared their stories of brutality and harassment at the hands of law enforcement, condemning its ubiquitous nature as well as singling out Cleveland’s particularly brutal Fourth District police.

March routes and rally sites for the NDP in major cities were generally audacious and confrontational, with O22 often choosing to convene at police stations themselves. Quetzal describes the difficulty and significance of this approach, saying, “I always thought that was the big strength about O22 [and the NDP]: the fact that you would [protest] right in front of [police stations]. People [would go] with a lot of terror, ...so [convincing families to speak at those sites] was a big deal.” This approach was also of strategic significance, designed to sharpen or, in Quetzal’s words, “step up” the struggle against police brutality while developing the commitment and fighting capacity of those involved in that struggle.

8 “October 22, 2000 5th National Day to Stop Police Brutality: In the Streets for Justice,” RW Online, last modified November 6, 2000, <https://revcom.us/a/v22/1070-79/1077/ndpy2k.htm> (accessed May 1, 2019).

Many marches during the NDP also deviated from standards insofar as they selected routes that wove through and sometimes terminated in ghettos and housing projects, in essence bringing the protest to those for whom the issue of police violence is the most relevant. Not only did this provide organizers with opportunities to agitate and propagandize among an essential demographic—the proletariat—but it also allowed those who were not previously part of the protest the chance to speak and be heard on the subject of police brutality and harassment. Furthermore, situating the NDP's march and rally sites in and around these proletarian centers provided O22 with the opportunity to familiarize protesters from other class backgrounds with the living conditions of precisely those communities most targeted by police brutality, repression, and criminalization. Juanita Young, a co-founder of Mothers Cry for Justice and perhaps the most fiery, outspoken, and recognized O22 organizer nationwide, speaks to this choice of venue, saying, "We try to pick an area which will draw attention.... We try to pick areas where it has the most violence or where people are targeted." Young was drawn into the struggle against police brutality following the murder of her son, Malcolm Ferguson, by a New York Police Department (NYPD) officer in March, 2000. Ferguson was shot in the head in an execution-style murder at point-blank range less than a week after having been arrested while protesting the acquittal of the four NYPD officers involved in the Diallo shooting, suggesting that his death may have been a political assassination.

While O22's focus was primarily on confronting the police brutality in overwhelmingly Black and proletarian communities, organizers of the NDP did not hesitate to condemn incidents of police violence and state repression that occurred outside of those parameters. Such was the case in the years immediately following the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks, which saw a rise in assaults and harassment against Muslim, Arab, and South Asian immigrants, among others. Cheng describes O22 not only addressing and condemning these issues during the NDP, but also helping to establish their own day of recognition, saying, "Because of the experience and the net-

work that was built through O22, it was very easy to build for a National Day of Solidarity with Muslim, Arab, and South Asian Immigrants in February, 2002.” Similarly, harassment of and violence against Latino immigrants at the US/Mexico border and throughout the US were addressed, condemned, and—importantly—linked systematically to an underlying politics of repression and criminalization at the NDP. Nwangaza speaks to this approach:

There were cases where border control would kill people with the same impunity on the border that [police] had in the cities and rural areas. We didn’t make a distinction between the divisions of the agencies of the state. You know, the cops is the cops is the cops; whether it’s the cop on the beat, the highway patrol, the sheriff, or a border patrol or [US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent]—all represent the exclusive claim of the state to coercion and violence, and the impunity and lack of regard with which they use it.

FAMILIES FIRST: CENTRAL, FOCAL, VISIBLE, AND VOCAL

At the heart of the NDP and O22 generally were the families of those killed by law enforcement, whose input and interests factored prominently into the Coalition’s many endeavors. Rather than appoint representatives to speak on their behalf, O22 insisted that the families themselves be the centerpiece of the NDP, providing them with a platform with which they could speak to the bitterness and resentment of loss while also demanding criminal charges against and convictions of killer cops and offending officers. This insistence that families be central, focal, visible, and vocal helped to humanize those affected by police violence, provided them with a momentary sense of catharsis before an engaged and sympathetic crowd, and emboldened others to share their stories.

Families were also front and center during marches, forcing media to capture the real face of the struggle against police brutality and symbolizing that O22 is a coalition of and for the people. While

this approach may initially seem unremarkable, it is in contrast with a great many scenarios in which a family's grief and pursuit of justice is overshadowed or outright co-opted by political opportunists—often in the form of careerist, nonprofit-organization activists today—rather than empowering victims to speak for themselves. One can imagine that this approach also appealed to people living in the many proletarian areas through which O22 marched, as those most visible and vocal looked and sounded like them and spoke to their day-to-day experiences with police.

In addition to establishing the NDP—a platform through which families could voice their pain and indignation while popularizing demands for criminal charges against and convictions of killer cops—O22 provided much-needed support to families in a number of other ways. Young reflects on O22's support, saying, “From day one to this day, they’ve been with me. O22 was the best thing that could’ve happened to a family, number one: because of the connections, and number two: because they stand for what they believe.” Among the connections were those to legal aid and media, while the most lasting and meaningful connections developed by O22 were often between families themselves. Families involved with O22 were encouraged to reach out to and provide those who had suffered a

Families lead a march on the NDP in NYC, 2014.



recent loss with emotional and logistical support as they navigated their lives in the wake of a loved one's murder by police. Young continues:

When I met some of the people from O22, they were really, really concerned. They hated the fact that I was in so much pain, and they just stayed with me everywhere I went. Anything going on, we'd sit down and we'd talk about it and we'd plan it.... I thought that was so good—to have that kind of help and that kind of support—because, like I said, they have never left me. I've met with other families, ...I bring them to [O22], and they do the same thing.... Here in New York, when I hear of a case [of police violence], nine times out of ten I get up, I get dressed, and I get a cab to go find the mother, or I'll go to the area where the [violence] was to try to get in touch with [the victim's] friends or somebody in person and meet the mothers that way.

Families were conceived of as crucial organizers and leaders in this capacity, traveling around the country with O22 organizers and developing ties with other families who had experienced loss at the hands of law enforcement. They would assist these other families, assuring each that they were not alone, and that they too had a role to play in O22's fight to overcome the epidemic of police brutality to which their loved one had fallen victim.

Another family member with whom we spoke was Andree Smith, a retired journalist and newspaper editor whose experience in political activism developed over the course of her career, as she fought to establish the humanity of Black people within the US and shed light on issues uniquely affecting them. Even before connecting with O22 following the murder of her son, Justin Smith, by Tulsa, Oklahoma police in 1998, Smith exercised a similar community-oriented approach to covering police violence, opting to speak with community and family members of those brutalized or killed rather than blithely parroting police accounts of how events unfolded. She recounts O22's family-to-family approach to outreach:

We [had] a conference call every week. Whenever we [heard] of someone who [was] murdered, [we'd] have someone reach out to [the vic-

tim's] family to let them know that they're not alone. One of the things that happened to me [after the death of my son] in '98 [was] that I felt so alone. There was no networking of families [prior to O22]. There was no community support. [So] we [would] try to support each other.... We went around the country supporting [families] when we heard about someone being killed. We went to Chicago[, Illinois], we went to Tamir Rice's mother in Cleveland, we went to Cincinnati[, Ohio], to Louisville[, Kentucky], to Tennessee, to New Jersey.... We went to several cities...trying to mobilize families to get involved in the movement.

Nwangaza addresses this approach:

When murders occurred, we'd go to the families and offer assistance and support.... We would go to them and say, "Here are other people around the country [who have had loved ones killed by police]. This is a problem that is going on. You shouldn't feel alone. You shouldn't feel ashamed. You should speak up and demand justice for your family member."

O22 anticipated and recognized the importance of families reaching out to one another rather than relying solely on activists who had not experienced the devastating loss of a loved one to police violence firsthand. Families alone can fully empathize with that particular combination of anger, confusion, heartbreak, isolation, shame, and stigmatization. Cheng speaks to the importance of families networking from personal experience, saying, "What [Young] and I found in the early 2000s was that having another family member go with an organizer to try to make contact with another family is important," as many families would be disconcerted or wary of the intentions and interests of organizers themselves. But, she continues:

Because [Young] was with me and she got to introduce herself and [mention] that her son died, we were welcomed into [their homes].... That was our one important lesson: that we needed to have another family member...to make that connection, 'cause otherwise they don't know who the hell you are, or what you want, or what you want with them.... Most times, the connection is partly to get them to realize

that [their loved one's killing is] not an isolated incident, which they probably do [realize], but don't think about it that way, 'cause it is very isolating when it happens. Also, just connecting them to other families, other people they can talk to, but also just to make sure they know that there are gonna be cops, media, government officials coming at them, and just preparing them for what's to come, and to know that we're there to help support them.... There are a lot of things we can't do, really, so most times, what we would offer was, "If you want a vigil organized, we can help you organize that. We'll help you get the word out; we'll help you make up a flyer.... If you want to do a protest, we'll organize that." It's mostly [that] if the family wanted to do something, then we [would] do what we [could] to make that happen.

Recognizing that offering direct support to each and every family affected by police violence was logistically impossible given the epidemic nature of the issue and the relatively modest size of the Coalition, O22 initiated efforts intended for remote outreach and support. Among these was a national call for mothers who had loved ones killed by police to contact O22, share the details of their stories, and endorse the Call for the NDP. Young explains, "Some cases you never hear about, like those cases where they got families in these small towns. [That's why] we put out our national call for mothers." Smith describes another form of outreach that had the capacity to support families remotely:

We put together a Family First Aid Kit, ...[because] when our sons were murdered, we didn't know what to do. We had no idea where to go or who to talk to; we were on our own.... When that occurs, you're confused. When you live in a society where those that are sworn to protect you destroy your family, destroy your loved ones, your whole world is shattered. We put together the First Aid Kit so that we could develop a support system and teach families how to develop their support systems, and how to raise their cases to supportive political, civil, and human rights groups.

O22 also made a point of helping families in the legal realm, from offering emotional support in the courtroom to providing advice in their choices of legal counsel. As Smith outlines above, all families

are in a state of complete devastation and dismay when a loved one is stolen from them, and lacking the appropriate legal experience or fluency, they are often led simply to pursue civil suits rather than criminal charges. Young explains:

I'd tell the families to be careful of the lawyers, because nine times out of ten, the lawyer's not out for justice; he's out for a civil thing, and an attorney won't tell the family he's a civil suit lawyer instead of a criminal lawyer.... So most of the time, [they're] fired for misrepresentation. Even though [the families] want a civil suit, they want to know what's happening in the criminal aspect [of the case].

Young credits O22 with helping to provide the appropriate legal support to many families, including her own, saying:

A lot of the families, if it wasn't for O22, wouldn't have got legal support, but that's what O22 is good for: exposing [police violence] and supporting the families.... O22 was definitely a big help [in my case], because they had lawyers and different people advise me.

Young has since applied what knowledge she gleaned from her experience with O22's legal support to assist many other families throughout the country.

Returning to the Family First Aid Kit, Smith describes that among its contents were a number of legal suggestions for families, including:

How to pursue legal strategies, ...to obtain their own pathologist, ... how to document what's happened to [their] loved ones (we [would] tell them which records they needed to collect), ...how to begin their own investigations, how to present their cases to the media. These are things that weren't available to us [prior to O22]. We wanted to make sure that other families could benefit from our experiences.

Though she joined O22 at a time when its organizational capacity was in decline, Cheng describes how, at the least, O22 would agitate and organize against police brutality and murder throughout the year by publicizing and otherwise supporting civil and criminal

cases brought against offending officers:

We would blast [information regarding the case] out there [and] let people know this is happening. We might try to organize a press conference before or after a vigil or protest or rally, and then we'd try to be in the courtroom to be supportive and help out.

In sum, the focus on and support of families was the backbone of O22 and factored into its every endeavor. But the Coalition was not a charity, and families were far from simply being recipients of attention and support; they were relied upon and challenged to be committed leaders and organizers—to take ownership of and responsibility over O22 by informing its content, stimulating its growth, and upholding its mission to stop police brutality, repression, and criminalization.

UNITED FRONT: WINNING THE SUPPORT OF OTHERS

In its effort to unite all who could be united to stand with families and other members of those communities most affected by police violence and state repression, O22 mobilized academics, activists, artists, community and religious leaders, lawyers, and others from many sections and strata of society. Cheng explains:

Part of O22's mission is to gather together people under the gun and not under the gun, ...and the idea is that there are those who are directly affected by police—by oppression—who need to have the strength to be able to stand up against it, but also need to know that other people have their backs.

Indeed, this approach to build a united front is clearly articulated in the Mission Statement of the NDP cited above, and in accordance, while its organizing efforts were centered around the proletariat first and foremost, O22 conducted outreach to and drew support from people representing a broad range of backgrounds and lifestyles in society.



Flanked by police, protesters carry placards remembering Stolen Lives through NYC on the NDP. The white-haired woman appearing at the front of this rally, Monica Shay, was a lead O22 organizer who tragically passed away in a 2011 shooting unrelated to her political activities.

Each year, O22 would draft a Call for groups and individuals to endorse the NDP and take responsibility for building for it. The means by which endorsers helped mobilize others varied according to their particular positions and strengths, but their combined efforts help demonstrate the validity and strategic vision of a united front approach. Prominent activists were approached, such as political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, who prerecorded audio of his encouragement from his prison cell to be shared with attendees of the NDP. Among the artists who endorsed the Call were Chuck D of Public Enemy, Lord Jamar of Brand Nubian, and Wyclef Jean, all of whom lent their celebrity to the cause by recording public service announcements urging others to partake in O22's scheduled actions and events. Community and religious leaders provided logistical and spiritual support to aggrieved families, often opening their doors to O22, as was the case in 1999 when the Life Church of God in Christ in

Riverside, California and the Washington Square Methodist Church in NYC hosted Stolen Lives induction ceremonies, during which the names of recent victims of police violence were added to an already staggering list of Stolen Lives nationwide.⁹ Lawyers—most notably those associated with the National Lawyers Guild—fought through on families’ cases, monitored the NDP for police misconduct, and provided legal aid to protesters in the event of their arrests. Organizers also approached students and teachers at both the high school and university levels, challenging them to bring the struggle against police brutality onto their campuses and into their classrooms.

Quetzal describes her experience on the academic front while organizing youth in LA, saying, “They started inviting me to go speak in their classrooms, and I met teachers.... It became a thing.” While she was positively received by students in schools throughout LA, from South Central to Beverly Hills, Quetzal recalls O22’s message being most fervently welcomed by youth in proletarian school districts. “There were high schools where [students] had to sneak me in,” she says. “They broke rules, because their story was being told and they were actually being heard.” Quetzal goes on to speak to the enthusiasm she witnessed organizing more radically-minded youth in the predominantly white outlying areas of LA, such as Lancaster, California:

The fact that they were invited to come and be part of this, and [be] downtown, and fight against police brutality, and...be amongst other people...was really exciting for them. Actually, they made up a huge percentage of the young population that came out [for the first NDP].

Quetzal’s experience with organizing for O22 reveals a more general standard applied throughout the Coalition: far from simply passing out flyers (or posting on social media today), organizers were asked to really engage with and speak to people, challenging them to commit to mobilize others for the NDP and to contribute in creative ways. Organizers tabled at the concerts of political artists like Ozom-

⁹ Margot Harry, “Remembering Stolen Lives,” RW Online, last modified June 27, 1999, <https://revcom.us/a/v21/1010-019/1012/slp.htm> (accessed May 1, 2019).

atli and Rage Against the Machine, challenging fans to engage with those artists' messages by standing with the people against police violence. Shopkeepers and staff were regularly challenged to put people's interests before profits by sacrificing ad space to display flyers promoting the NDP on their storefront windows. Television spots featuring celebrities and families challenging millions of viewers to mobilize against police brutality aired on popular channels such as Black Entertainment Television (BET) and MTV thanks to contributions from organizations such as Physicians for Social Responsibility. "It began to take on broader, more visible proportions," says Nwangaza, as organizers:

went after movie stars—not just for donating money, but for taking a public stand in support of the families—to really build the consciousness among visible people. In fact, when we did the Calls [to mobilize for the NDP] every year, they were the first line of attack (for lack of a better term), because they were the people that we were trying to get to sign on as endorsers to the Call in order to give the Call visibility, give the Call credibility, and to attract other people to signing on to the Call. That was work that was done by O22 and that was spearheaded by the RCP—people who had contact with various folk in the entertainment industry, especially names that ordinary people would recognize.

As a result of these organizing and outreach efforts, the breadth and magnitude of groups and individuals to attend and/or endorse the NDP was staggering. At its height in 1998, *Revolutionary Worker* reported that the NDP drew support from Carl Dix, National Spokesperson of the RCP, King Mission of the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, and Herman Ferguson, Chairperson of the New Afrikan Liberation Front among others in NYC; Stan Willis of the Conference of Black Lawyers, Reverend Costella Cannon of the Campaign to End the Death Penalty, and Wallace "Gator" Bradley of United in Peace among others in Chicago; James Lafferty, Executive Director of the National Lawyers Guild, Reverend M. Andrew Robinson-Gaither of the Faith United Methodist Church, and Tomás Lopez of the Immigrant Rights Committee among others in LA; and Isabel Huie of Chinese for Affirmative Action, Richard Diaz of the

Human Rights Defense Committee, and Julia Allen of the Prison Activist Resource Center among others in San Francisco, California.¹⁰ This strategy of struggling to develop a broad, united front led by those “under the gun” and supported by people from all walks of life lent itself to the character and creativity of the NDP, and enabled O22 to develop a network of thousands in the movement to stop police brutality.

THE STOLEN LIVES PROJECT: DOCUMENTING THE EPIDEMIC

Among the practical accomplishments achieved by O22 in its heyday was the initiation of the SLP, a joint effort of the Anthony Baez Foundation, the National Lawyers Guild, and O22. According to Cheng:

The mission of the [SLP] is to assemble national documentation of people killed by US law enforcement agents from 1990 to the present. Due to the fact that there had not been any official accounting of police killings made available to the public, those who were working with... [O22] decided in 1996 to conduct their own documentation....

The idea for the [SLP] originated from late People’s Poet Louis Reyes Rivera. In 1996, Rivera suggested to those who worked on what used to be called the Revolutionary Worker that since they claim repeatedly in their newspaper that police brutality is systemic, they should devote resources usually afforded to an issue of the paper to gather names of people killed by police and publish the list in order to show readers just how systemic it is. As mobilization for a national day of protest against police brutality was underway, the yet-to-be-named project began, and a booklet was distributed at the first [NDP] as the “pilot of a project to collect the names.”¹¹

¹⁰ “National Press Conferences Target Police Brutality,” RW Online, last modified September 27, 1998, <https://revcom.us/a/v20/970-79/975/22pres.htm> (accessed May 1, 2019).

¹¹ Kathie Cheng, “The Stolen Lives Project Online: A Digital Humanities Project,” (PhD diss., St. John’s University, 2018), 4.

Within the next year, this booklet was followed by a self-published book featuring the names of 500 people killed by police, and “in 1998, an updated version renamed *Stolen Lives: Killed by Law Enforcement* was released, covering 1,000 cases.”¹² In 1999, a second edition of the book was published by Seven Stories Press, featuring the names and/or stories of more than 2,000 victims of police killings, further humanizing the deceased and offering proof of the epidemic nature—the size and the scope—of police violence. Since the publication of the Second Edition, the SLP decided to periodically update a free PDF version of the book online.¹³

As Cheng asserts, in an age in which one can simply use a search browser to collect national data on police violence due to a number of media outlets and organizations compiling that data, it is easy to forget that “For more than a decade, the SLP was the only existing national documentation of police homicides in the United States, with local documentation by a variety of organizations and individuals contributing to the national data.”¹⁴ Quetzal describes the irony of having to turn to nongovernmental organizations for data on police violence:

You can go to [the federal government] and find out how many bikes are stolen in the US, and they can break it down by brand and color, but if you go to them and you ask them how many people have been killed by the police, ...they can't tell you. They don't keep records of it, and they never have. Today, you find out all that because there are these outside sources that have done [the documentation], even people

¹² *Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

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from outside the country.

Nwangaza elaborates on the degree of effort required to develop the first national database as well as the significance of this type of work:

We created the first database in the day that you actually had to go to the library and dig up the microfiche, and fortunately, the students at Sonoma State [University] began that process in conjunction with O22. Creating this database—the first grassroots database, which is the model that all the other databases are based on—[was momentous].... We established the epidemic of state violence with the United Nations—on file at the Human Rights Council is a copy of the *Stolen Lives: [Killed by Law Enforcement] (Second Edition)*, as well as the “Every 28 Hours” report [“Operation Ghetto Storm”] that was done by Arlene Eisen, which is based on the databases that grew out of the original O22/SLP databases.¹⁵

One of the aforementioned individuals who worked in conjunction with Sonoma State University was Karen Saari, who would become a lead researcher for the SLP. Saari details her journey in the Introduction to 1999’s *Stolen Lives: Killed by Law Enforcement (Second Edition)*:

In the fall of 1996, a friend who was organizing for the first [NDP] asked me to help out. In the course of attending meetings, I met some of the relatives of victims of police killings. When I heard their stories of how their loved ones were killed, I was horrified. Like most people, I had believed the news accounts of these killings which usually describe the victims as criminals posing an immediate threat to the community. After meeting with many relatives and eyewitnesses over the course of the past three years, I now know that this widely promoted notion is very far from the truth.

Continuing to attend meetings, I would hear about police killings occurring weekly and decided to keep track of these deaths. I began my own newspaper research and compiled the results. When I could, I contacted family members for their version of events. I have yet to

¹⁵ “Operation Ghetto Storm” available at <http://www.operationghettostorm.org/>.

come across an eyewitness account which corroborates the police version of events.

I soon joined up with the [SLP]. With a grant from the San Francisco Foundation and a gift of fiscal administration from the Sonoma County Center for Peace & Justice, I collaborated with Project Censored at Sonoma State University and began a search of LexisNexis and other national newspaper databases for cases of police brutality for the year of 1997. That search produced approximately half of the cases listed in this edition.

Simultaneously, public service announcements filmed by artists and families of victims aired on MTV. Organizations such as Physicians for Social Responsibility contributed funds to air the announcements on [BET]. These announcements called on people to send any information they had about someone who'd been killed by police to the [SLP]. Many individuals and organizations, among them the Center for Constitutional Rights, spread the word about Stolen Lives. Victims' families and friends, lawyers who handle police brutality cases, and local civil rights groups sent in stories. These were some of the many ways we uncovered these cases.¹⁶

Cheng reiterates the arduous nature and novelty of such grassroots organizing and research:

Nothing like this had existed before. The research and documentation were being done in a time before anyone could easily just conduct a Google search to find cases of police homicides. Physical files of newspaper clippings and handwritten notes were among the sources of documentation, and three-ring binders of loose-leaf paper functioned as the documentation. Submission forms were mailed in from all around the country from loved ones of Stolen Lives as well as anyone who cared that a case was included in the documentation. In preparing for publication, volunteer editors were given floppy disks of the data to work with. Collaborations with and contributions from people around the country with different skills, experiences, resources, and access to resources made the documentation and the publication of the more

¹⁶ National Lawyers Guild, Anthony Baez Foundation, & October 22 Coalition to Stop Police Brutality, *Stolen Lives: Killed by Law Enforcement* (Second Edition) (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999), iii.

easily accessible book possible. For many families and other loved ones of those killed by police, the truth of what happened, how it happened, and how no one was ever going to answer for the death was finally being publicly revealed. There was also now something that countered how their loved one was being depicted by police and media. For them and the many others who have felt and experienced the brunt of police violence for much if not all of their lives, there was finally evidence for how much of a national epidemic police brutality is.¹⁷

Quetzal also speaks to how the SLP—and, in particular, *Stolen Lives: Killed by Law Enforcement (Second Edition)*—served to redeem victims of police killings whose humanity had been distorted by media and police:

The particularity of the *Stolen Lives* book was that it was more from [the perspectives of] the families, because their kids got killed by the police, and then they got killed again by the media. The media would say these terrible things about their kids.... That's why the *Stolen Lives* book actually print [from the perspective] of the family.

Speaking more to the exhaustive independent collection of data that was undertaken by the SLP when the Internet was only in its infancy, Quetzal describes how students played a role. She mentions that at every school—even those in affluent, predominantly white areas such as Beverly Hills—and in every classroom there was at least one student who knew someone who had been brutalized or murdered by police. “This is how we did a lot of *Stolen Lives* [documentation],” Quetzal says, “we had a form that we gave to these kids to fill out.... This is something that really spoke to their day-to-day life experience.” As the SLP became a more formal endeavor, so too did members begin developing more formal teams that were tasked with collecting data and conducting grassroots investigations into cases of *Stolen Lives*. Quetzal describes some early experiences on her part as a member of one of these *Stolen Lives* investigation teams:

¹⁷ Kathie Cheng, “The *Stolen Lives* Project Online: A Digital Humanities Project,” (PhD diss., St. John’s University, 2018), 6–9.

We united with the National Lawyers Guild, and they turned over cases [from] around the country that they were working with, ...but then we started these Stolen Lives teams, and in LA, we were trying to figure out how [to conduct investigations]. At the time, ...in South Central there was only one hospital—Martin Luther King[, Jr. Community] Hospital—and so I just went there with some students [and] people I knew, and we stood outside with clipboards and we started just talking to people. We started talking to the nurses and the doctors, but also just people that were in the lobby, and just started asking them, “Do you know somebody that got killed by the police?” you know, like, “Who are they? What’s their names?” and try to get as much information down [as possible].

Many of those we spoke with referenced being initially drawn to O22 after having seen ads, banners, and/or flyers displaying the thousands of names of people murdered by police since 1990 or having been introduced to *Stolen Lives: Killed by Law Enforcement (Second Edition)*, revealing the SLP’s utility as an organizing tool in the struggle against police brutality. More than anything, however, the SLP served three interrelated purposes: (1) it publicly established the epidemic and systemic nature of excessive and unwarranted police violence, (2) it helped to break the silence and stigma of families coping with the loss of a loved one at the hands of law enforcement, and (3) it restored the humanity of those to whom media added insult to grievous injury through its routine distortion of the characters of the dead in a manner meant to suggest that their homicides were justifiable.

UNDAUNTED: THE DYNAMIC OF RESISTANCE/REPRESSION/MORE RESISTANCE

Predictably, events and individuals associated with O22 were the recipients of a great deal of repression as the Coalition fought to combat the epidemic of police brutality. Rather than intimidating those involved, however, instances of repression often steeled their convictions and inspired others to join in the struggle. *Revolutionary*

Worker described efforts of repression across a number of cities in the build-up to 1998's NDP as well as on the Day itself:

In several places, the authorities tried to silence the people. In [NYC] it was the attempted denial of a permit. In [LA], the morning of October 22, the police staged a sweep through the Nickerson Gardens housing projects of Watts an hour before people gathered for the march—stopping and handcuffing organizers for the Day. In Chicago's Cabrini Green, police descended on the young men and women waiting for the busses, ordering them to their knees, frisking and insulting them one after the other for almost an hour—ordering them to disperse and announcing that it was “dangerous” and not-allowed for people like them to gather in one place. Police attacked an [O22] benefit concert at Club Soda in Washington, DC and concert-goers sat down in the street and read out loud from the *Stolen Lives* book. Fifteen people were arrested in San Diego[, California].

But police actions did not—could not—stop the message of [O22] from going out across the US. Everywhere, people from the ghettos and housing projects dared to hook up and speak out. And the brutal police attack on the Matthew Shepard memorial in [NYC], right on the eve of October 22, made many people even more determined to act and forge new unities in the face of the police.^{18 19}

Revisiting the militancy of LA's NDP in 2000, Revolutionary Worker painted a harrowing picture of the police response to protesters' plans to encircle LAPD headquarters:

There were signs that the police were preparing for an assault. When the march reached the front of Parker Center, riot cops were out in

18 Matthew Shepard was a 21-year-old gay university student who was beaten, robbed, tied to a fence, and tortured by Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson in October, 1998 near Laramie, Wyoming. Left to die by his assailants in near-freezing temperatures, he was later found by a cyclist who initially mistook him for a scarecrow. He succumbed to his wounds at a hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado, and his death garnered national media coverage while prompting a larger debate over hate crime legislation and LGBTQ rights.

19 “Thousands March to Stop Police Brutality: October 22: 3rd National Day of Protest,” RW Online, last modified November 1, 1998, <https://revcom.us/a/v20/980-89/980/1022rep.htm> (accessed May 1, 2019).

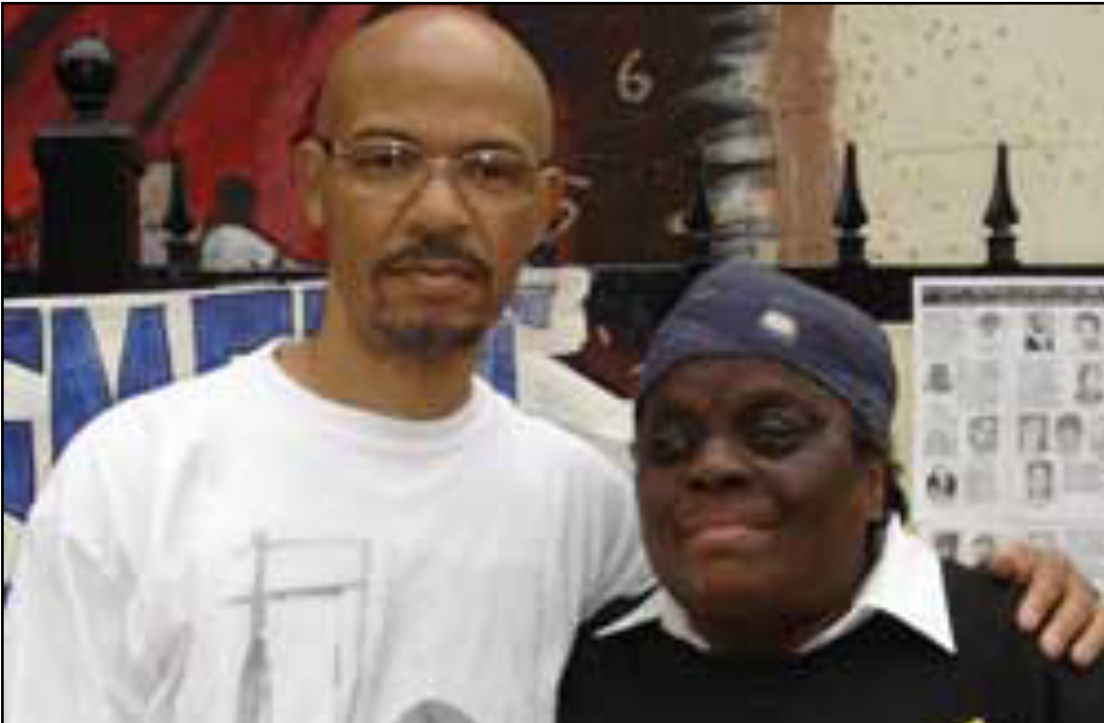
full force with clubs drawn. “They’re over there with their rubber bullets, waiting to attack you, like they did at the DNC, like they do in dark alleys,” a young revolutionary told the crowd. “They know we’re watching them. They know we’re here in numbers, united, putting our differences aside and fighting for this cause. Show them.” As the youth marched to surround the building, they were blocked by police, who disregarded the march permit. The police launched their attack without warning and the POP, POP, POP of rubber bullet guns echoed blocks away.

Dozens of people were hit with rubber bullets, some seriously injured—including a student from [the University of California, Los Angeles] who suffered permanent damage in her eye. Cops on horses advanced on the crowd, hitting people with their long riot batons. Riot cops on foot beat and pushed people while others shot into the crowd. Hundreds of people were pushed back into the main rally area while others were forced down side streets and out of the area when they found many of the streets leading back to the rally blocked by cops.

The families of the Stolen Lives were on the stage speaking about their loved ones killed by the police when the police opened fire—hitting some family members in the back with rubber bullets as they tried to protect the children. Sofia Saldaña, whose son Juan was murdered by the notorious Rampart cops, said, “Now I know what my son must have felt like surrounded by these dogs—I thought they were going to try and kill us.” At least four people were arrested—three face misdemeanor charges and one faces a felony assault with a deadly weapon charge.

But the people stood strong, especially the youth who stepped out to protect the rally from the advancing cops. Young women were right up in the faces of the police, calling them out as murderers. Hundreds of youth sat down directly in front of the advancing cops, blocking them from sweeping into the rally. And the rally went on, as family members bravely spoke out—joining people across the country who took the streets, held memorials, marched, sang, and shouted to bring out the truth about how the police had killed their children, brothers, uncles, sisters, and cousins.²⁰

²⁰ “October 22, 2000 5th National Day to Stop Police Brutality: In the Streets for Justice,” RW Online, last modified November 6, 2000, <https://revcom.us/a/v22/1070->



Heyward, Sr. and Young on the NDP in NYC, 2005.

Among the general strategies deployed against social movements by the bourgeois state are the intensification of repression to meet the actual or perceived threat of a heightened or radicalized resistance and the targeting of individual leaders as a means to destabilize or dishearten the movement as a whole. O22 experienced more than its fair share of harassment as it mobilized for the NDP over the years, but the most consistent targets of repression were those most visible and vocal leaders within the Coalition: the families themselves. Revolutionary Worker reported on one such incident involving Heyward, Sr.:

Since his 13-year-old son was murdered by a housing cop in 1994, ...Heyward, Sr. has become an outspoken organizer against police brutality. On October 22, 2000, as Nicholas was preparing to MC [the NDP], the police arrested him at his home at 6 [AM], charging him with failure to pay a ticket for not having his dog on a leash! Lawyers and activists immediately located Nicholas, demanding his release, and escorted him to the rally to speak.²¹

79/1077/ndpy2k.htm (accessed May 1, 2019).

²¹ *Ibid.*

In the aftermath of that year's contentious NDP, the bourgeois state took its attempts to silence voices of dissent to a new level by attempting to declare an executive board member of O22 mentally unfit after she courageously refused to accept a settlement for the murder of her son by police. Revolutionary Worker detailed the experience:

The authorities employed another method of attack against Arnetta Grable of Detroit, Michigan. Following October 22, 2000, the state offered her \$2.5 million to settle her lawsuit against the killer cop who murdered her son Lamar. When she refused to accept the offer—determined to take the case to court and expose the brutal killing of Lamar—the authorities tried to declare her insane.

"They wanted to declare me incompetent," Arnetta explained, "put a strange person that I had never seen in charge of my son's estate, remove me as head of the estate and with the pretense of looking out for the best interests of my son's daughter and my minor daughter. They were going to accept the money in the name of the children and just move me out of the way." Supporters packed the courtroom and the authorities' plan to have...Grable declared incompetent was defeated.²²

Among the families and organizers associated with O22, Young was undeniably visited with the most extreme and persistent repression, which is a testament to her determination and tirelessness in pursuing justice and putting an end to police brutality. "When [police] feel people is a threat to them," Young says, "they harass them to no end." She recalls some of the many instances of harassment she has experienced over the years:

They started just continually harassing my family. I took O22 to [my] house [and] did a press conference telling the cops to back off my family, but they wasn't even listening. They wanted me to stop going around talking about what they did [to my son], but I would talk about what they did plus what they did to other families, because by the time I got involved, I started meeting so many other families that this had

²² "O22 Holds National Strategy Session for 2001: Stop Police Brutality, Repression and the Criminalization of a Generation!" RW Online, last modified March 4, 2001, <https://revcom.us/a/v22/1090-99/1093/ndp.htm> (accessed May 1, 2019).

happened to....

They would come to my house, knock on the door, [ask] me if I know such-and-such a person, [and] I said, "I'm not opening the door." Then they would come back, and they would literally break into my door, and kept on about [how] they had a warrant, and they didn't have no warrant. They would search and break the furniture in my house, talking about they looking for drugs. I'm like, "What?!"

One day they came to my house, they broke in, [and] they took my baby son, talking about [how] they found all these drugs in his window.... I went to the courthouse, [and] I couldn't find any [evidence of drugs] nowhere. He came home that afternoon and said he never saw no drugs.... That case was thrown out; they know they never had no case.

Another time, my daughter needed to go to the hospital, ...and when the police came—they know they're not allowed in my house—so they stood outside waiting for the ambulance. The ambulance came, and while they was talking to my daughter, the police came in. When I came out of my room, I'm like, "Why are y'all in my house?" They said, "We got a call to come here." I said, "We don't need you; can you leave?" They wouldn't leave. We got into an argument. Like three, four cops threw me into the room, [and] beat me so bad [that] I don't even know to this day how I got up. They left me in the room, and then, when I was able to stand up, I got up [and] I went and stood in the doorway of the kitchen. I was so angry. I had a container of sweet potatoes on the microwave—I took them and threw them down at the floor. They said I threw it at [them, so] they jumped me again. Then they arrested me.

Among her health issues, Young suffers from asthma and has been legally blind since she was a teenager. Despite knowing her condition, arresting officers seldom—if ever—attend to her medical needs, as was the case on this day. Young continues:

I told them, "I can't breathe! I can't breathe!" They didn't pay me no attention. So when we got to the precinct, the lady who [shared my] cell said, "I'm not gonna stay in here while this lady's dying, but she's dying!" A little while later, the ambulance came, and then another ambulance came. And then [Emergency Medical Services personnel] said, "Let's go! Let's go! Let's go! We don't got no time left; let's go!" They

said, “How long have you been like this?!” They had to rush me to the hospital....

Luckily, Jacobi [Medical Center] knew me, ...and they got me back straight. And they said, “What happened to her?!” One [cop] said they didn’t know. Another one told them I beat up a cop. [A nurse] said, “If we let you go, [do] you gotta go with [the second cop]?” I said, “Probably.” She said, “[Then] you ain’t leaving here!”

Despite attempts on the part of medical personnel to keep her safe, police insisted that so long as Young stayed in their care, she be guarded and handcuffed. One morning at approximately 3 AM, she even had her ankles shackled by officers. “It was incidents like that that I had to go through,” Young says.

In *yet another* instance of harassment, Young and her family were illegally evicted from their apartment in the South Bronx by her landlord, a former New Jersey police officer. She describes the context surrounding the event:

I was evicted, ‘cause the landlord was a cop from New Jersey, ...and there was a [police brutality] case in Jersey, and we went, and we went right up against the cops; we didn’t back down. [I] come to find out some of those same cops knew this cop, and when he found out, he told my [apartment] supervisor, and the super told me, “You know you is in trouble.” I’m like, “For what?” He said, “The landlord is mad ‘cause you was in Jersey making trouble.” I’m like, “Yo...” Then they got it all over the front page of newspapers: me going at it with the New Jersey cops.

So [the landlord] made up some bullmess of a lie—even the judge told him, ...“She don’t owe you [\$11,000 in unpaid rent]; Section 8 stopped paying you rent because of the violations in that apartment.” He said, “If you want your money, you let her back in there.” [The landlord] said, “No....” So that’s how I got evicted from that apartment. When [O22] heard what was going on, they was right there.

Members of O22 and the RCP’s former youth group, the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade, immediately traveled to Young’s apartment building and assisted her family with their move.

Encountering repression on this scale at both the individual and organizational levels helps clarify the efficacy of and need for a united front to combat police violence. By winning the support of broad sections of people—including lawyers—O22 was able to utilize a variety of resources and talents to defend those who came under attack during its struggle against police brutality. Anticipating the targeting of families, in particular, O22 always provided security for them as they participated in and exited the NDP, but as a people's coalition, it did not turn to an outside source; it relied on the people themselves.

In summation, to organize resistance against armed killers can be daunting, to say the least, and O22 saw no shortage of repression in the course thereof. Its response to this harassment, however, was not to back down or to make appeals to the same authorities that they were protesting, but rather, to defend against it and expose the harassment as yet another form of repression. Thus, these intimidation tactics were transformed into fuel for the figurative fire, allowing the Coalition to consciously make use of the openings they provided to ratchet up the struggle and steel the convictions of those involved. Chants became more militant, demands became more forcefully delivered, and protesters marched with a more palpable rage, which carried them through the streets before arriving at police stations, where they would confront their oppressors undaunted.

THE INFLUENCE OF MAOISM AND THE REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST PARTY, USA

To better frame the nature of O22's unique approach toward organizing, it is necessary to explore the politics from which it drew inspiration. As has been referenced above, the RCP was an initiator of the Coalition, and its influence over O22's decision-making process cannot be understated. "The [Revolutionary Communist] Party was a big initiator," Quetzal says, "it wouldn't have happened if the Party didn't initiate it; you wouldn't have an O22. That's just plain and sim-

ple.” Aside from establishing its foundations, the RCP was decisive on many of the most crucial questions that confronted O22, including for what and for whom the Coalition should exist, what types of groups and individuals to reach out to for support, which voices should be most prominent at the NDP, and who should provide security for the families. Quetzal explains that this wasn’t done in an authoritarian manner, but rather, through patient and principled struggle. The RCP set the bar high by demanding an end to police brutality while struggling with other Coalition members who sought to limit its scope by calling for more moderate reforms, like appealing to the bourgeois state to institute civilian review boards. Another opening for struggle arose around censoring the people themselves. While some members of O22 felt that the “colorful” and vitriolic language directed at police by the more proletarian protesters was unnecessary, the RCP struggled to ensure that people were provided a platform from which they could speak honestly and openly. “The Party, from the beginning, fought...to bring the voices of the masses to the forefront,” Quetzal says. In essence, she explains, “the Party fought for what [O22] should be: a spotlight on police brutality,” a means to resist it, and a voice for those it affects most.

The RCP was a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist party, and while its methods and associated philosophy in regards to organizing have altered considerably since playing its leading role in the Coalition at its height, one can clearly see evidence of a Maoist political line running throughout much of O22’s work. A central tenet of Maoism is what is referred to as the mass line, which begins from the premise that “The people, and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history.”²³ This understanding is readily apparent in O22’s overall approach, from its basis in and among the people—most notably, Black people and the proletariat—to its insistence and reliance upon the people to liberate themselves from police brutality, in stark contrast to the multitude of organizations that look to and rely on civilian review boards, the Department of Justice, “good” dis-

23 Mao Zedong, “Quotations from Mao Tse Tung: Chapter II,” <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/ch11.htm> (accessed May 1, 2019).

trict attorneys, and other “saviors from above.” Nwangaza discusses this further:

I think another part of [O22] was...the concept of the empowerment of the people—the training of people to be able to tell their own stories and giving them the space and the support to tell their own stories.... So it wound up with the survivors of police violence being the experts on their stories [and] developing expertise on the system, while the others of us used [our] greater understanding of the system to support them and to challenge the system.

It is far from coincidental that the centerpiece of the NDP—families sharing their pain and rage over the injustices visited upon them by police—also resembles the Speak Bitterness campaign carried out in accompaniment with land reform laws in revolutionary China circa 1950. During these meetings, peasants and tenant farmers were encouraged to express their anger and share stories of the brutality and exploitation they experienced at the hands of former landlords, which enabled them to identify a common enemy and recognize the system behind their oppression.

The focus of the mass line is on relating to the masses directly and becoming integrated with them in order to better comprehend their experiences and struggles. According to Mao Zedong:

all correct leadership is necessarily “from the masses, to the masses.” This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time.²⁴

This is also reflected in the work undertaken by O22 in its heyday:

²⁴ *Ibid.*

by going to the masses and hearing their stories of police brutality and repression, organizers began to realize the extent of the epidemic. They then concentrated and systematized these stories in order to propagate and explain that these were not isolated incidents, but threads in a larger fabric of police violence that spans the entirety of the US. O22 then mobilized the masses for the NDP, when they would take action by collectively confronting the epidemic nationwide and sharing their stories with the support of a broad coalition of people.

In comparison to most organizations both then and now, O22's distinguishing faith in, immersion among, and love for those at the bottom of society are further expressions of the influence of the mass line. These characteristics are inspired by Mao's recommendation fifty years prior:

to be vigilant and to see that no comrade at any post is divorced from the masses. [The Chinese Communist Party] should teach every comrade to love the people and listen attentively to the voice of the masses; to identify himself with the masses wherever he goes and, instead of standing above them, to immerse himself among them; and, according to their present level, to awaken them or raise their political consciousness and help them gradually to organize themselves voluntarily and to set going all essential struggles permitted by the internal and external circumstances of the given time and place.²⁵

While O22 was not a communist organization, it was guided by communist principles and served communist aims, providing an example of a revolutionary organizing model with which to bring forward and develop a revolutionary people. For communists, building mass resistance through vehicles like O22 that are based among the proletariat, in particular, and organizing resistance against oppression, in general, play important parts in preparing the ground—and the people—for revolution. Certainly, many mass leaders from the proletariat like Heyward, Sr. and Young came forward politically through O22, and resistance to police brutality was significant—

²⁵ *Ibid.*

ly strengthened. However, if mass movements are to play a part in building toward revolution, they must be steered in that direction by communist leadership. Within these movements, the most politically advanced must be developed into communists and recruited into the vanguard party, strengthening the subjective factor in advance of—and in order to build toward—a revolutionary situation.

In this regard, the RCP fell short of its objectives by failing to develop a broad and deep revolutionary consciousness within the core of the movement or recruit a substantial number of communists out of O22. The challenge of building and leading mass movements in the present while connecting them with the larger, more protracted objective of revolution is considerable, and fraught with the potential for errors to be made. One error, referred to by communists as economism, is to regard these movements as ends in and of themselves, disconnected from revolutionary objectives. Another error is failing to find living and relevant ways to connect revolutionary ideology and objectives with mass resistance against the particular forms of oppression that people are subjected to under capitalism-imperialism. This error is referred to by communists as dogmatism. Economism characterized much of the RCP's work in the late 1990s, the period during which it devoted substantial resources to O22. Rather than rectify this tendency, the RCP veered toward dogmatism, and in doing so, drastically scaled back its involvement in and leadership of the Coalition in favor of other pursuits. This dealt O22 a heavy blow from which it has yet to recover.

CHALLENGES AND LEGACY

More than twenty-three years after its founding, O22 continues to operate, and while many of the families involved continue fighting for justice, the Coalition's actions and efforts are far more modest today than they were at its height. The first of two challenges contributing to its decline was the RCP's shifting of focus and resources away from O22 post 9/11. The RCP correctly saw the need to orga-

nize resistance to the George W. Bush administration's juggernaut of war and repression after 9/11, but in doing so, tilted its focus toward the petty bourgeoisie and away from the proletariat. Then, around 2004, the RCP began to greatly emphasize establishing a "culture of appreciation, promotion, and popularization" around its leader, Bob Avakian, and concluded that time and resources could be better devoted toward pursuing that goal. In a word, during O22's heyday from 1996-2000, the RCP had committed a substantial amount of its people and resources to making the Coalition into what it was, so predictably, O22's organizational capacity and potential greatly diminished once support was withdrawn.

The second challenge contributing to O22's decline was the chilling effect of 9/11. The events of and government propaganda after 9/11 convinced many that all police are heroes, and that to condemn their actions in the face of a common, foreign enemy is misguided, ungrateful, and unpatriotic. Cheng describes the contradictions presented while attempting to organize the NDP in NYC in the immediate aftermath of 9/11:

First off, we were meeting [to mobilize for the NDP] downtown, so we [didn't] have a place to meet, 'cause that [was] ground zero; we [couldn't] even go there.... There were already a lot of events that were being cancelled, ...so we were thinking, "Do we need to cancel?" And, of course, people were still getting beaten and killed by cops during that time we were figuring this out. We were like, "No, we still have to move forward." There were meetings where some of the lawyers that worked with us were even saying, "Maybe you should do something indoors," like something quieter, you know?... There was this one mother whose son was killed in Queens, whose other son was saved by a cop in the Twin Towers, so she had a lot of mixed feelings.... So there were a lot of discussions. A core group of us were like, "We're definitely doing something; we're not gonna not have an NDP," you know? And when we had national conference calls, it was just so surreal, because the other areas didn't have the same problem; they weren't feeling any pressure to *not* do something, because they weren't in New York.... So it was very difficult to organize, but I felt like [it was] one of the most

triumphant NDPs.... We were up against so much.

According to Young, the contentious decision of whether or not to organize the NDP ultimately fell on the families involved, as is consistent with O22's general approach. She recalls the controversy:

Before 9/11, police brutality was at its highest, and then, all of a sudden, ...they was like, "You can't do that," and, "Other people are suffering...." [A journalist for the New York Post referred to Young as a] "Deranged mother," that's what he called me, because I wouldn't back down off of what the police did to my family and lots of other families.²⁶ [Some organizers] were like, "No, we can't do [the NDP] this year." I said, "We doing [the NDP] this year," and they say, "You serious, Juanita?" They said, "Well, we gonna let the parents call it." I said, "Well, we called it; we are coming out this year."

Despite inheriting a changed political landscape post 9/11, O22 continued its work, integrating the new reality into its existing frame

²⁶ Rod Dreher, "These Pathetic, Lying Losers are a Sick Joke," New York Post, last modified October 10, 2001, <https://nypost.com/2001/10/10/these-pathetic-lying-losers-are-a-sick-joke/> (accessed May 1, 2019).

O22 challenging the narrative of police heroes in the post-9/11 era.



of analysis. In response to the heightened level of violence against and vulnerability of Muslim, Arab, and South Asian immigrants, the Coalition helped organize a National Day of Solidarity, as previously referenced. Cheng recalls, “We focused a lot on the USA PATRIOT Act, too, ‘cause we were looking at the infringement on civil liberties as another form of oppression.” In keeping with its tradition of linking outrages to the brutal functioning of a larger system, many members of O22 were also quick to condemn and correlate the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq with the ongoing repression and violence perpetrated by police and other state agencies in the US itself.

Though relatively few people today know of O22, they are unknowing beneficiaries of its legacy. Smith suggests that without the painstaking work undertaken by O22, our awareness of and capacity to track statistics relating to police violence would be greatly impacted. While this is important in its own right, it is also significant given that the current movement against police violence sprang from a recognition of these statistics. Smith says:

Through the work of O22, not only the Black community, but the community at large has become aware of the seriousness of police brutality in this country, and that these incidents are not isolated. There’s a growing movement; people are aware today of police brutality, and people are raising their voices against police brutality. This all stems from the groundwork that O22 has done for the past twenty-plus years. That’s the most significant outcome of the groundwork that O22 laid, because that’s the first step: you have to be aware of the problem first.... We’ve planted the seeds.

What else might people involved in the movement today learn from O22? “Some humility, to start off with,” says Nwangaza. She continues:

My father used to say to us in the ’60s and ’70s that we were arrogant. He would say, “You all behave as if you invented the Civil Rights Movement; what do you think we’ve been doing all of these years?” And I think that young people and organizations today would do well to...

recognize that what we're dealing with is a continuum [that]—at a minimum—has gone on for the past 500 years, and that each generation... (as it's been said by one of the continental African freedom fighters, Franz Fanon)...is presented a challenge and a question as to whether or not it will meet it or it will abandon it.... Each generation builds on the work of the previous generation in the struggle to reestablish a sane and just world, or to establish one if we feel that one never existed.

Like Nwangaza, Young also sees the need for the movement to recognize this as a protracted struggle, and that this new generation of activists needs to reach out to and learn from experienced fighters. She says:

Black Lives Matter want to see results *right now*, as opposed to trying to see how we can get this done. O22, we plan.... A lot of Black Lives Matter is more of a younger age—which is good—so they can build for the next generation. *But*, at the rate they're going, they not gonna be teaching that next generation. They lack the experience. They could learn that rallying, getting to the problem and trying to expose the problem...is definitely one of the ways to do it. Having workshops around, say, the police brutality issue, workshops around why cops are so aggressive in these schools, ...because whenever you dealing with a situation that's so bad that it's hard to focus, then when you not focusing clearly, you gonna definitely make mistakes. And if you not dealing with somebody that's got some kind of knowledge in doing what you doing, you just gonna get nowhere.

Quetzal hopes to impart her knowledge on the importance of organizing the proletariat in the struggle today:

The oppressed got a voice and a certain legitimacy to their concerns [through O22].... That's what people need to learn: going to people at the bottom of society, listening to their legitimate concerns, and speaking to their legitimate concerns.... It's good that [the current movement] is out there, but it's not going out to the bottom of society.

Finally, noticing a pattern of petty sectarian squabbles as organizations vie for leadership and ownership over the movement, Cheng recommends they forego their respective egos and focus—first and

foremost—on the mission at hand:

I would hope being inclusive [is something today's activists can learn from O22's approach]. I'm seeing less and less of that these days.... I'm like, "C'mon, just work together for this one day!" One shift I've observed...is that it does seem that people want to have more ownership [over] the movement or the work now than before.... I don't know if it's a branding thing or what.... I guess part of it is identity politics, and part of it is nongovernmental organizations and nonprofits, [who are more concerned with] who's supporting what or who's getting paid for what, but it's looking kinda ugly in terms of being able to be united. It's kinda painful to observe.

Sharing Cheng's concern over the motivations of the careerist, nonprofit-organization activists who are so eager to be the faces and voices of the movement today is Tory Russell, a lead organizer in the Ferguson rebellion and Mission Director of The International Black Freedom Alliance. Reflecting on the Ferguson rebellion and its aftermath on the five-year anniversary, Russell writes plainly about his disappointment:

We were in the streets, attempting to construct the narrative of us, to share our truths, to heal, protect, and build our Ferguson; while our so-called movement brothers, sisters, and allies were building their platforms on our backs and redirecting resources to their pockets.

We have been forced to watch the movement turn away from the masses of Black people activated by [Michael Brown]'s death and become mainly focused on lucrative mainstream acceptance from white media and white funders....

The clout chasers are all but gone now. Most have bolted for major, liberally-funded, social-justice cities or to white institutions to be on the other side of case studies. Gone with them are the resources and capital, both financial and social. And the media, both Black and mainstream, still go back to them over and over again even though they know that they haven't lived, organized, or protested in Ferguson in years.²⁷

27 Tory Russell, "Notes on an Uprising: Reflections of a Ferguson Organizer 5

In contrast, O22 maintained its presence among the masses and its insistence that their voices be most prominent in the struggle against police brutality. It demonstrated the capacity, willingness, and necessity to bring forward those most deeply oppressed to serve as the backbone in the battle for a better world. In doing so, O22 further established to other participants that the struggle against police violence and state repression is not merely a question of “fighting the good fight,” but for many, a matter of life and death. It demonstrated the capacity to mold—through political practice and training—committed fighters and leaders from among the most oppressed communities in the US who have little to no formal political experience. O22 demonstrated the capacity to develop and draw upon the strength of a broad, united front of academics, activists, artists, community and religious leaders, lawyers, and others to stand in solidarity with the most oppressed members of society. It demonstrated the necessity to recognize police violence as systemic, a form of political repression meant to control populations whose wretched conditions make them potentially rebellious. Finally, O22 demonstrated the necessity of a correct theoretical orientation to guide political work. Owing predominantly to its communist/Maoist organizing model, O22 insisted that the oppressed themselves be the most visible and vocal members of the Coalition, giving them a deeper sense of ownership and control over its decisions. In contrast with many groups today, rather than asking for an end to police brutality, murder, and repression, O22 demanded it, and rather than appealing to politicians or directing people to seek redress through official channels, it asked them to rely on nobody but themselves and nothing but their collective determination.

Years After the State-Sanctioned Killing of Mike Brown,” *Essence*, last modified August 9, 2019, <https://www.essence.com/feature/ferguson-mike-brown-5-years-to-ry-russell/> (accessed October 10, 2019).