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# SOCIAL JUSTICE

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The Gang Truce: A Movement for Social Justice

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# The Gang Truce: A Movement for Social Justice

## An Interview with Michael Zinzun

*Q: How did the Coalition develop?*

Community activists found out that we were very ineffective when we would respond to a particular shooting in a particular community. However, we were very effective when we mobilized various communities to converge on one particular community, to give that community support. It was important to document the case, identify the officers involved, come up with alternative solutions to police abuse, and fight the “us against them” mentality. We formed defense committees, or justice committees. We let the people in that community chair their own meetings, set their own structure, and become part of the Coalition Against Police Abuse. That’s how we initially set it up.

We have since been successful in collecting over 9,000 documents on police officers. We are able to assist attorneys in prosecuting officers who may have had prior shootings or beatings on their records. The attorneys are often unable to get this information through the legal process. We have some 14,000 documents that we collected on police complaints so we can monitor where the shootings and beatings are taking place: in the Black community, the Latino community, and so on. We still take approximately 10 complaints a day, every day of the week.

*Q: Are all communities involved in this effort?*

No one is set aside. Black, Latino, and white communities contain individuals who have been abused by the police. In addition, we not only try to get people involved, but we also try to appeal to them for support, including financial support. We don’t have a nonprofit status and that allows us to speak out, to endorse candidates who may support our attempts to get police accountability and community control of the police. Our main objective is an independent civilian police review board with an 11-point program that has been used by a number of

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**MICHAEL ZINZUN** is the chairperson of the Coalition Against Police Abuse, which was organized in 1975 after a wave of shootings by the Los Angeles Police Department and other law enforcement agencies in the area. Zinzun, who was blinded in one eye by a police attack, has been an outspoken advocate of community control of the police. He was very instrumental in forging the truce between the Crips and the Bloods in Southern California, which grew out of the work of the Coalition. In this interview, he discusses the work of the Coalition, the truce, and efforts to broaden the truce into a movement for social justice. The interview was conducted by Nancy Stein.

cities around the country. It's probably one of the most sweeping review board documents in the country.

We've attempted twice to win voter approval for a charter amendment, gathering over 100,000 signatures on petitions. We'll continue to try to build momentum on that. We don't think community-based policing will work anywhere in the country unless you have police accountability and some type of civilian control. But it's important to state that we're not talking about a rubber stamp police commission.

*Q: How do you pursue cases of police violence?*

In officer shootings, we can go to the District Attorney's office. For a number of years we have called for an independent inquiry to determine if it was death at the hands of another, accidental, or so on. We feel that a civilian review board would take the power from the appointed boards. But we do go to the appointed officials in an attempt to get them to change policy. However, many of them are ex-police officers, or have sided with the police department. Mayor Reardon, who is a conservative Republican, simply appoints people to these boards and commissions who agree with him and they basically bend to his pressure.

It is important to document every case. We publish information to let people know how to report their complaints to us. We let them know what their rights are, how much time they have to file a claim for damages. We go to the DA's office, special investigations division, to ask them to investigate and sit in on autopsies when people are killed. However, because they spent so much money on the O.J. Simpson case, they have stopped doing this for now. However, they continue to document the cases.

We have an 85-page manual that we give organizations around the country so they can see what we're doing step-by-step and how they can gather the information and go through the process of documenting cases themselves. We were successful, for instance, in St. Petersburg, Florida. A former officer involved in police brutality ran for police chief. We were successful in getting him ousted by flying witnesses out there to expose him. He turned around and tried to run for mayor, but we were successful in preventing his election. And all this came about as a result of the documentation we had on this officer.

*Q: How did the work on police violence lead to the gang truce?*

We found out that the vast majority of complaints about police brutality come from youth. Youth tend to be more attentive, to listen more, when they're in this type of situation. As a result, we began to develop a plan that showed them how important it is to come together rather than fight each other. When they're in trouble with the law, or have been abused, they find out that the police tend to be more of a threat than the person on the next block or from a different set. We participated in the formation of the gang truce before the Los Angeles uprising [in response to the Rodney King verdict]. The L.A. uprising galvanized the gang truce

and in fact we're going on the fifth anniversary of the truce this year. We were able to seize the opportunity to bring a lot of young people together.

Now we've set up computer classes, silk screening, and a speakers' bureau. The young people, the Crips and Bloods, go out to speak to various organizations about their experience and why people need to support the gang truce. They also talk about why we need to fight police abuse and were able to successfully tie all this together.

There would not have been a Million Man March had there not been an attempt to bring youth together on a nationwide level. They couldn't have brought that many youth together had there been constant fighting. But the young people who came from around the country, the vast majority not only participated, but we also had hotel rooms where they sat down to help form and strengthen the effort to bring about a national gang truce.

We don't set up the gang truce. The young people have to set it up themselves. We assist them and we try to give them some support. The empowerment lies in them being part of it. We think it is very critical to fight the "do it for me" mentality. Our slogan is, "We won't do it for you, but we will do it with you."

There are a number of reasons why young people start getting active in supporting the truce. Some circumstances include the death of a friend or family member, facing a long jail sentence, or as a result of their own direct experience at the hands of the police. Sometimes they come to the conclusion that they have played a negative role in the community and they want to change that. They begin to see that there is a viable alternative to their existing lifestyle. Others get involved as a result of changes in their personal lives: having children, getting into a stable relationship, finding a job that they like. These changes give a young person something to live and work for and can motivate people to move in a different direction.

*Q: Have there been efforts by the police or other authorities to try to break up the truce?*

There are constant attempts. It's a threat to them to have young people working together, demanding jobs, demanding justice. They've never come out and supported the truce. In fact, the city has recently expanded the anti-terrorist division to eliminate probable cause necessary to investigate a crime. This means I can call and say I think you're doing something wrong and they can spy on you for six months and tap your phones without any other evidence.

*Q: Without going through any kind of due process?*

Exactly. And we believe the first group they're going to target is the youth. By assuming they're gang members and may be storing guns and drugs, they can actually tap people's phones and spy on them for up to six months with a warrant extension for another 90 days just on a tip. This just came out last month. We're fighting that type of effort to undermine the gang truce.

*Q: Is the community getting support from the corporate world?*

It varies. There are small companies that may donate to us. One man donated some computers and we had them upgraded as part of our computer training. We had a student volunteer set everything up and train our young people. Now these youth are training others. One of the organizations, Cal Arts (California Arts Institute), assists us with the video class that we're starting in a couple of weeks, to train young people in the use of video equipment.

*Q: Have you become involved with economic and community development issues?*

We have an economic development statement whose objective is *not* to step on the next person as corporate America proposes. Its goal is to collectively work together to better particular communities. Our statement is very clear. If people can't go along with that statement, if they're coming in with their own goals, we tell them to get on. We have a full silk screening shop. Silk screening people have come in saying, "Why don't you let us use your shop and I can do my own business. We'll pay you a little bit." We say, no, that's for the young people; we're not going to let you wear down the equipment making your own money. So we turn those types of things down.

The very little bit of corporate support we've had comes from foundations like the Liberty Hill Foundation — organizations that don't have a lot of strings attached. We'll appeal to the Barbra Streisand Foundation and use the money for the speakers' bureau. We pay young people to speak. According to how much time they're going to spend, they get anywhere from \$25 to \$100 for a speaking engagement. It's a little money in their pocket and they feel good about it. They get the message out, try to bring more people in. But we stay away from beer and alcohol corporations or corporations that would simply use us to legitimize themselves. So we find ourselves limited. We have to rely on the community and organizations like the Unitarian Church.

We also set up the "Off the Roach" program, where youth actually learn how to kill roaches in the community. They can make \$200 a day killing roaches. This is a take off on the Black Panthers' "Off the Pigs" slogan. A young woman we trained back in 1974 in our community center in Pasadena went on to get her license. She's one of the few black, licensed, pest control operators. So she goes into the neighborhoods and trains young people in the use of boric acid. We use boric acid because it's nontoxic and environmentally safe. All of this has come out of the Coalition Against Police Abuse, linking it with the gang truce.

*Q: You mentioned going to other parts of the country and other countries. How broad is this movement and how diverse?*

We put an emphasis on linking the local, national, and international struggles for social justice and environmental justice. A magazine came out that listed all the organizations on a worldwide level working on these struggles and we probably have the largest entry, two pages. Everybody else has a blurb. There are pictures showing the march we had, information about the gang truce from interviews with

some of our people. We try to keep those ties. We just had a person come back from England. He was in Manchester working with the youth there setting up a program.

As part of our speakers' bureau, we've sent youth to Brazil three times. They've been to France and London. They meet with groups that work with gangs in the *favelas* in Brazil and in various parts of Brixton, London, and other major cities. They also travel around this country. Last year there was strong participation in the gang truce rally held in Watts. Some of our young people, along with others from around the country, went to Boston for a three-day conference where they could really interact with each other. We had some of the young people from Washington, D.C., stay here for two weeks and some of our young people went to D.C. for two weeks. We also took groups of young people to the Barrios Unidos Conference to strengthen links between Blacks and Latinos.

We also have political education classes where we try to provide some political direction. We don't want to dictate to young people, but we do want to make sure that we're not talking about simply shifting from one oppressor to another. I'm opposed to a Black oppressor, like I am to a white or Latino or any kind of oppressor. I think they have to understand that the objective is to bring about some type of social and economic justice.

*Q: What about African American, Latino, Asian, and other gangs working together? Does the speakers' bureau include people from different groups?*

Yes. For example, there was a big problem in Venice, California, where Blacks and Latinos were fighting. Some 17 people were killed in a very short period of time due to fighting between the Shoreline Crips and the V-13, an old, Latino gang. People were gunned down. They are now trucing. There hasn't been one death there attributed to the gangs since they started a truce in this area, which is still active.

We recently held a one-day seminar that was organized by Asian, Latino, and Black youth, including Barrios Unidos and Young Koreans United. This was important because it showed the solidarity that is necessary to bring about change.

*Q: What are some of the arguments you use, what works, to prevent fighting and to build a truce?*

First of all, I'm not opposed to a one-on-one fight. If people have disagreements, we have dispute resolution. There have been incidents in which people have been out of line and they have been forced to pay restitution. Not through the courts and all that madness, but actually by pressure from the community. But there are times when two people disagree and they have to go toe to toe. Once it's over, it's over. There have been incidents like that. We don't promote that, but it happens. And because it happens, we have to figure out how best to monitor it.

The police will blame any incident where two or three or more people are involved on a gang. We say crime was here before gangs. Crime will continue as long as we have a repressive system. People are going to rob banks. Are those gang members? The first thing they said about the kid who allegedly shot Bill Cosby's

son was that he was part of the Russian mafia. Then they had to rescind that and say it was a lone act. They are so quick to put this forward because they want to keep the community on edge and frightened. That keeps their pockets full.

*Q: Do young people object to being called gang members?*

Ex-gang members may object; gang members, no. Different sets might prefer to be called a Crip or a Blood, instead of a gang member. But the point is, they're beginning to shed that. After a while, they say, "I'm not a gang member, my set is the Jordan Down housing project. I'm not a Crip. I may live in a Crip neighborhood, but I'm not a Crip." So they shed that. But we let them shed that. Everybody has a set. People in the community object to a set, but wherever you live, that's your set. Your neighborhood is your set. If something happened in your set, your set would rally. If there was a big fire or emergency, your set would rally to protect itself.

*Q: What other issues are you promoting?*

We've come out with proposals regarding the federal forfeiture money, money from drug seizures. There's no reason why that money shouldn't go to furthering education. The schools don't have to close at 3:00. They could bring back some laid-off teachers. Each campus and high school has supplies, print shops, computer classes, cooking classes, auto mechanics — almost every trade is there. And it's locked up. Why not use that money to open it for evening classes so young people can get involved in those areas of trade. If they want to go higher, they can. If they're unsuccessful, they can always fall back on their trade. For a number of years we've been promoting that the federal forfeiture money be used for that. But they refuse. They say no, we're going to give it to the police.

Once again, it shows very clearly how much concern they really have for our youth. They have more prisons in the state of California than anywhere else. They're building prisons to house Blacks and Latinos and poor whites on a mass scale and it costs literally thousands of dollars when they open up a prison. As they begin to privatize this sector, stocks and bonds are issued. Once you have stocks and bonds, it's in your interest to keep that entity open and profitable so stockholders can increase their interest. One part of the community is pitted against the other. We try to expose this.

We also tried to expose the role of the CIA, not just in L.A., but around the country, particularly during Iran-Contra, when millions of tons of cocaine were flown into our community. We're saying there is a direct attack on the Black community because of the Black experience in this country and the unresolved Black question. The civil war didn't resolve it, civil rights didn't resolve it. And they don't know what to do with millions of descendants of slaves. When the family was kept together, history could continue. But we were stripped of everything for so many years that there's this inner hate. This inner feeling of rejection and estrangement from society.

*Q: How are you organizing around these issues?*

The 10-point program we have is in place. (See the full program at the end of this interview.) One point concerns rumor control. For instance, one well-known ex-gang member who supported the truce was shot and killed. Rumor had it that he was killed by another set. The police were promoting it. We immediately called a press conference of all the different gangs, Crips and Bloods, to dispel the rumor. In fact, it was an in-house thing; he had been cheating somebody, threatened them, and the person shot him in fear. That is a crime, but it wasn't gang warfare.

*Q: What about the death of Tupac and Notorious BIG? How has this been portrayed as a gang dispute? Is this something you would speak out about?*

You see just as much violence in the corporate world as in the street. The same violence takes place, assassinations, gangsterism, and so on. My concern is that the government is attempting to lump all of the politics together. As far as Tupac, I do believe there was rivalry, but not gang involvement. He supported the gang truce. He supported Geronimo Pratt; he was raised in the community around this whole question of supporting people's rights and he has promoted that for years. The problems that existed were not gang related. A lot of young people from the East Coast come out here and a lot of young people from here go out there. I think it was built up to appear as if gang involvement may be a possibility. They raised enough doubt to warrant eliminating gangster rap. I'm opposed to glorifying gangs, calling women bitches, vulgarizing music. But I'm not opposed to those who are saying let's stand up and fight, let's fight against police brutality, let's fight against oppression, let's fight against white supremacy.

You have to define what you mean. For example, there's nothing wrong with riding dirt bikes, but you don't ride dirt bikes on our environmentally safe trails. Does that mean you get rid of all dirt bikes? No. You can use that example for a number of things. You have to be clear. On civilian review boards, some people say we need a civilian review board that's run by the police. It may be a review board, but does that mean you get rid of all review boards because that approach doesn't work? No.

It is essential to define what is in the best interest of the community. One thing that we've been taught in this country is to listen to our so-called elected officials. Most of them are corrupt; we simply shuffle the same people in the same little box rather than getting rid of the box altogether. I liken it to an old car. If a car is old and raggedy, I don't care how many new drivers you have, the car still isn't going to work. You have to change the engine, you have to change the parts. And that's what I'm talking about.

*Q: Is there anything else you would want to say about your work?*

We link together local, national, and international struggles. The Civil Rights Movement, the Black Panther Party, the Brown Berets, they all paved the road for us. Our responsibility now is to build a bus to travel on that road. But one thing we

want to make clear is there won't be any back seats on this bus. We're all going to be riding up front to be sure our interests are met. We're all going to be riding up front if we have to build a bus and drive it sideways. We're all going to be riding up front and that is what's critical. We won't let someone else determine the direction we as a people will go because they traditionally have led us down the wrong road.

*Contact the Coalition Against Police Abuse if you are interested in starting a similar project in your community. To support the work of the coalition and the gang truce, send a tax-deductible donation to Communities in Support of the Gang Truce at 2824 S. Western Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90018; 213-733-2107.*

### **Introduction to Communities in Support of the Gang Truce:**

We actively support the Gang Truce initiated by the Crips and the Bloods of Watts, California. We understand that the truce is not just a cessation of gang warfare, but a dynamic, militant movement for social justice. We are very proud of the young women and men who have risked so much to restore peace and unity to the streets. The colors that they have tied together in a flag of liberation will never again be separated.

In endorsing the Truce, we also pledge ourselves to support the following urgent work:

— The establishment of a grass-roots rumor-control network to counteract misinformation;

— A speakers' bureau made up of active supporters of the Truce who have been taking the real story of the Truce and the L.A. Rebellion across the country and around the world;

— A campaign to redirect federally seized drug forfeiture monies from repressive law enforcement programs into youth employment programs by further expanding the definition of crime prevention;

— Urban Life Management Project;

— A project to hire jobless youth to recycle waste plastic into sturdy dome-homes for the homeless;

— Neighborhood "cooperative zones" as an alternative to the cruel hoax of "enterprise zones";

— The campaign for a full refunding of cutbacks in local schools, welfare, and recreation budgets;

— Resistance against the mass criminalization of youth of color, especially the use of nonconviction arrest records to deny jobs to youth and young adults;

— Freedom for all political prisoners, including DeWayne Holmes, Geronimo Pratt [now free], and Leonard Peltier;

— A united front against all efforts to divide African-American from Latino and Asian youth, or to deny the human rights of immigrants.

We recognize that since the beginning of our existence in this country, many African-American and Latino people have suffered from *dehumanizing conditions of racism, estrangement from society, massive unemployment, and a lack of real educational opportunities.*

Our communities, as well as other segments of society, are faced with the real possibility of living a subhuman existence, or even collective extinction, unless we *begin to link our understanding to concrete action — NOW!*

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