

History of Mexican - Black Solidarity

Written by Debbie Johnson ID3640
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There is a long history of Mexicans welcoming and assisting Blacks fleeing American slavery. The fact of the matter is that when white “slave-hunting” militias would come into Mexico demanding that their “property”—the enslaved workers—be returned, many Mexicans rejected these pleas and were angered at the fact that these slave hunters would have the audacity to enter Mexico and attempt to impose their laws in a nation that had already banned slavery for moral and religious reasons.

As early as 1811, the Rev. Jose Morelos—a Mexican of African descent—led an all-Black army brigade to help fight for Mexican independence. In 1855 more than 4,000 runaway slaves were helped by Mexicans in Texas to escape and find freedom in Mexico. The Underground Railroad was not just into Canada. It went south as well.

Indeed, throughout three centuries, African slaves were joined by Mexicans in opposition to the exploitation of Africans by European “immigrants—settlers—on the North American continent. Just a few examples of this long and rich history of solidarity are:

- In 1546, Mexico recorded the first conspiracy against slavery, which occurred in Mexico City among a coalition of enslaved Africans and indigenous insurgents.
- In 1609 in Vera Cruz, Mexico, Yanga established the first free pueblo of formerly enslaved Africans in the Western Hemisphere.
- In 1693 within the area of the “United States,” which was in fact Mexican territory, an alliance between African runaways and rebellious indigenous tribes developed and resulted in considerable cooperation and intermarriages between them. It was much like that which developed between African people and the American Indian communities.
- In 1820, in Mexico, the pro-independence army commanded by Black Gen. Vicente Ramon

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Guerrero was joined and saved by the courageous Mexican/Indigenous leader Pedro Ascencio. This army won many battles in resisting French and American colonial wars of occupation.

- In 1836, during the battle of the Alamo, Mexican troops fought not only to keep the U.S. from annexing Texas, but also to abolish the dreaded practice of slavery carried out by pro-slavery white settlers. While the Mexican people did not have to join in this fight, they believed slavery was wrong, and they helped fight to stop it. Mexicans consistently took in and helped Black slaves who would run away from the U.S. Another “underground railroad”—this one south of the border—saved the lives and allowed the freedom of thousands of African people fleeing enslavement by European settlers.

- During the period before the Civil War, Mexican authorities refused to return enslaved runaways to the U.S. slaveholders. Aided by Mexicans in Texas, thousands of runaways escaped to freedom in Mexico. The U.S. government had to send 20 percent of its whole army to the Mexican border to try to stop this and intimidate the Mexican people, but the people continued to aid escaping slaves.

- In 1862, during the Civil War, at the same time French colonialists had invaded Mexico seeking to take over. However, at the battle of Puebla on May 5, the Mexican defenders, with the help of freed African slaves—this army was considered the complete underdog—defeated and turned back the French invasion. It was a great victory, now celebrated as Cinco de Mayo. This victory was also a blow to the slaveholders of the United States.

- One historical event, organized through the solidarity of Mexican, Blacks, Indigenous and Asian people, was the “Plan de San Diego.” This was intended as a general uprising by these peoples joined in the Southwest, initiated in an effort to regain the lands stolen in the U.S.’s aggression in the 1840s, which include California, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and other states of what is now the U.S. Southwest. The plan actually addressed and recognized the contributions of Blacks, Asians and Indigenous people by granting them freedom and autonomy. Although the plan was not successful, it revealed the long history of solidarity of peoples of color in struggle against those who would enslave them.

- In 1866, Mexican President Benito Juarez confirmed an 1851 land grant giving Black people in Mexico a sizeable place of refuge at Nacimiento.

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- More recently, in 1960, the Latin American communities were excited by the hosting of the Cuban delegation, led by Fidel Castro in their historic visit to Harlem and the United Nations. This pride and joy was shared and celebrated equally by the African American community.
- In 1964 that joint celebration and welcome was laid out by the African American and Latino community to the heroic revolutionary leader Che Guevara. The pride and joy of each of these communities with the presence of Che would be remembered and celebrated for years.
- In that year, Che Guevara also met with the revered Malcolm X, as Malcolm offered his solidarity and appreciation for the work Che had done with freedom fighters in the Congo as they fought against the neocolonial “immigrants” [settlers] there.
- In 1968, solidarity was developed in Southern California and the Southwest among the Brown Berets, Black Panthers, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and other progressive youth organizations.
- In 1992, during the April 29 rebellion in Los Angeles, Latino and African American neighbors recognized their common plight, and demonstrated their collective rage against continuing acts of injustice, oppression and exploitation.
- Then came the magnificent immigrant-rights demonstrations of last spring. What glorious events they were, across the country, in wave after wave of white and brown—the white clothing of the millions of demonstrators and the brown faces of the Latino/ Mexican peoples who were joined by Central America and South American workers, which were also joined by Caribbean, Asian, African, and African American allies. Make no mistake about it, this class solidarity shook the ruling class to its very toes. It frightened and deeply worried them. It gave a glimpse, even in the midst of periods of reaction, of the crucial struggles that are on the agenda.

The current attacks against immigrants must be seen as attacks on all workers. This current assault on Latinos/Mexicans is just another tactic—like racism, homophobia and sexism, that the ruling class uses to pit workers against each other. The only winners when this happens are always the bosses.

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Note: The above are excerpts from a talk given by Debbie Johnson at a meeting in Detroit during Black History Month this year.

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