

From the PES Confronting Racism Task Force:

## **AND CITIES' RIGHTS?**

by Kate Esposito

Philadelphia, albeit a great city, is no longer “The Workshop of the World” where mills churned and unions organized the workers. You name it, Philadelphia made it: textiles, shoes, iron and steel, hardware, locomotives, rugs, furniture, ships, hats, clocks, etc. at firms like Baldwin Locomotive, Cramps Shipyard, Stetson Hats and countless smaller family-owned factories and businesses. There were the great publishing houses of Curtis (*Saturday Evening Post*) and J.B. Lippincott (*To Kill A Mockingbird*) and the department stores Gimbels, Lit Brothers, Strawbridge and Clothier’s and of course Wanamaker’s. In 1953, 359,000 Philadelphians were employed in manufacturing jobs, 45% of the workforce. In 1970, one third of the jobs were in manufacturing, but by 2010 only one in ten were.

Needless to say, even before these jobs disappeared, the black and brown populations here experienced higher rates of unemployment and poverty than the white population. During the Depression, the black unemployment rate was 50%. In the 1950s, unemployment for black people was double that for whites. In 2010 the poverty rate for the Hispanic population was 44%. Today, of the families surviving on less than \$10,000 a year, 57% are African-American.

So, as the scrapers have surpassed Billy Penn’s hat, Philadelphia has morphed into a very different city. We watched the Pope tool around in his modest Philly Fiat and Hillary Clinton accept her ill-fated nomination at a near flawless (by production standards) convention at the Wells Fargo Center. Center City has become a locus of corporate dominance with Comcast as king. The Convention Center draws major events. Philadelphia was recently designated the nation’s first “World Heritage City.” We are known for our great restaurants, sports teams, hospitals, our historical importance and cultural institutions, making Philadelphia a top tourist destination. Job growth now is in the hospitality and service sectors, which are largely underpaid and not unionized.

Meanwhile real estate values and rents have skyrocketed in Center City and are rapidly spreading to other neighborhoods, displacing untold numbers, in the wake of hospitals, universities and stadium expansions. “Ah, well” one might say, “that’s progress.”

For some few. But hidden in all of this “progress” is another story: The fact that Philadelphia is the poorest large city in the country. More than 25% of our population live in poverty and most of those suffering in deep poverty are black and brown people. This is explained succinctly in the POWER-generated report *Black Work Matters*, which is a must read for a fuller understanding of where this deep poverty exists and who is most affected. For our kids, the public schools have been profoundly impacted by substandard state funding for years. Now statistically proven by POWER member David Mosenkis, Philadelphia and many other districts have been victims of what POWER describes as “educational apartheid,” less per student funding in districts with majority black and brown students. In Philadelphia, it’s about \$2,000 per student per year.

Our City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection also has an extremely high incarceration rate, taking many presumed innocent black and brown people, charged with low level, non-violent crimes, out of their families and keeping them jailed since they cannot afford to post a cash bail.

The Commonwealth's response to these issues includes keeping the state minimum wage at \$7.25, preempting Philadelphia from raising the wage on its own, only putting the small increases in school funding through the newly approved fair funding formula that addresses state funding disparity based on race, and continuing tough on crime measures like life sentences without the possibility of parole and a cash bail system that disproportionately affects communities of color. Additionally, the federal government is doing its level best to eliminate and incapacitate the programs that provide needed services and opportunities for the poor.

The proposed Trump budget, if passed, promises devastating impacts on cities including the total elimination of the Community Development Block Grant Program, the Home Investment Partnership Program, the Self-Help Homeownership Opportunity Program and the Low Income Heating and Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). Deep cuts in the WIC (Women, Infants and Children) nutritional program, SNAP (food stamps), CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program), Medicaid (\$877 billion over 10 years), and a \$21.7 billion cut in TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) over 10 years are proposed. Also threatened are cuts in Unemployment Insurance, the Earned Income Tax Credit, SSI, SSDI, Medicare and Social Security. So when Candidate Trump asked poor people of color in struggling communities, "What the hell do you have to lose," by voting for him, we have his answer now.

Add in the DOJ's threats to punish Philadelphia as a Sanctuary City for trying to provide undocumented residents some level of security. As a Sanctuary City, the immigrant community would be less afraid of deportation and more likely to cooperate with the police in reporting crime, thus making the city safer. While corporations and developers benefit from tax subsidies and publicly funded development grants for their gentrification efforts, our residents pay a high sales tax, transit fares, real estate taxes, wage taxes and now a beverage tax, all making it very difficult for the poor to even survive, especially those living in neighborhoods that are food deserts. So in this morass of inequality and unfairness, do cities have any say in response to "states rights" and a malevolent, racist/nativist federal budget and policies?

Some organizations think so. The Right To The City Alliance (RTC) emerged in 2007 as a unified response to gentrification and a call to halt the displacement of low-income people, people of color, marginalized LGBTQ communities, and youths of color from their historic urban neighborhoods. They are a national alliance of racial, economic and environmental justice organizations.

Through shared principles and a common frame and theory of change, RTC is building a national movement for racial justice, urban justice, human rights, and democracy. Their platform includes: Land For People vs. Land for Speculation, Land Ownership for Public Use, Economic Justice for working class communities of color and LGBTQ people, Freedom from Police and State Harassment, Immigrant Justice, Services and Community Institutions, Environmental Justice, Reparations, Democracy and Participation.

The National League of Cities was founded in 1924 as a national organization to strengthen local government. Today 1,600 cities, towns and villages along with 18,000 communities participate through their state municipal leagues. The mission of the NLC is to strengthen and promote cities as centers of opportunity, leadership and governance. They believe in municipal authority over municipal issues, representative, participatory local government and the value of diversity throughout their organization and communities. Among their goals is to pro-actively drive federal policy on behalf of cities, on issues that directly impact them.

NLC's Executive Director Clarence E. Anthony, in response to North Carolina HB2, put it plainly, "The nation's cities are united in the fight for the principles of local authority. Local authority embodies the idea that local elected leaders have the responsibility—and are in the best position—to make decisions that affect their residents and communities. Whether it's standing by our values of inclusiveness, setting wage levels that actually match the costs of living, or affirming the importance of immigrants in the fabric of our communities, local governments play a critical role in creating an environment where cities—including all of our residents, and the businesses they use and own—are able to thrive. That's the reason why local governments are the most trusted level of government—because we know our residents best, and they depend and rely on us in our fight toward progress. Cities will not stand down as states aggressively seek to undermine the fundamental rights of localities to determine their own destinies," added Anthony. "North Carolina's HB2 is the latest in a deeply disturbing series of actions taken by states to preempt local control in favor of partisanship and politics. As a nation founded on the principles of equality, we have proven time and again that unity—not division—makes our nation stronger."

As the nation's poorest large city, with so many people of color losing hope in their communities, we need to find the political will, progressive initiatives and bold strategies to gain the autonomy to stand up to federal and state abusive dominance. **So, Philadelphia... "Get Up, Stand Up...Stand Up For Your Rights!"**

*Statistical Sources: Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, [philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/](http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/) "Workshop of the World", Walter Licht, Black Work Matters Report (POWER).  
Budget Source: Washington Post, May 23, 2017 by Kim Soffen and Denise Lu.*