

Why Move to Amend Centralizes the Work of Dismantling Racism and Other Oppressions

Move to Amend National Leadership Team

Move to Amend is a coalition that is committed to anti-oppression work, and has been from the beginning of our organization. Anti-oppression means to acknowledge oppression in societies, economies, cultures and groups, and to remove or negate the influence of that oppression. We specifically centralize dismantling racism in our work because of the way race was manufactured historically in the United States, and the effects that has had and continues to have on the work we do to create a just world.

Move to Amend has two central goals as an organization: first, to amend the Constitution to say that corporations aren't people and money isn't speech; and second, to create genuine, justice-driven, participatory democracy in the United States.

Many of us understand the first goal. It's the reason many of us got involved in Move to Amend in the first place. But for many of us, the second goal can feel daunting and hard to understand, if only because the very corporate, elitist structures we're fighting have convinced people that democracy means simply casting a vote on election day. What would it look like to create a democracy where people really mattered and ruled?

Move to Amend believes that democracy is not the act of voting, or even of getting involved. Democracy is an attitude of self-respect, a commitment to dismantle structures of exploitation, and a dedication to building just structures and cultures in their place. Building a real democracy means recognizing that the structures of violence we are fighting have harmed and targeted some groups much more than others.

Knowing that, we understand that building just structures must mean that the groups most harmed by our current system should have the most say in how to change it, and those who are most affected by political decisions should make them. Real democracy means that all people are included in the phrase "We the People."

We stress this because how we define democracy has huge implications for the way we do our work.

Some groups who do good work choose not to address racism. Others do anti-oppression work in addition to their regular campaigns. For Move to Amend, however, it's different.

Since corporatism can't exist without racism -- since it depends on a 'throwaway' class of people who must suffer to maintain the comfort of the powerful -- anti-oppression cannot just be part of our campaigns, it must *be* our campaign. And since this system inherently harms and targets people of color, we literally cannot have a democracy movement -- let alone a real democracy -- without centralizing the economic and political realities of people of color, and following their leadership in changing these realities.

Specifically, Move to Amend must commit to a campaign that centralizes race and analyzes power:

- Because our old "republic" was founded on the wishes of white, wealthy men, and we can't build a new democracy without everyone who was left out the first time.
- Because people of color have never had a functioning democracy to "restore," and so we can't just get things back to 'normal' and be done.
- Because the worst effects of corporate rule are borne by poor communities of color.
- Because we must collaborate with communities of color to fight the worst symptoms of corporate rule as we fight to dismantle it altogether.
- Because this is not a campaign finance movement for white people, but a democracy movement that demands radical, sweeping and structural change.
- Because we want to win, and we need everyone to do that. We cannot leave out our most natural allies -- those that understand, based on their lived daily experience, that this system is a failure and that only a deep overhaul will fix it.

Some people will agree with some or even all of these ideas. Others might feel that we are "muddying our message". But our message is not just about ending corporate personhood and money in politics. Our message is democracy, and this is what democracy requires.

So, we must dismantle racism within Move to Amend as we work to dismantle racist corporate structures in the world. Racism is not something we deal with after we've amended the Constitution. It's something we deal with now, because it impacts our movements and our ability to build true power for the people. Racism is not someone else's problem, it's our own.

This can be hard for white folks to hear because we've been taught to believe that racism is an active form of hatred toward people of a certain skin color -- an agenda carried out only by bigots and hate groups. If we view racism this way, we can easily think that anti-racism work does not apply to us and get offended when someone suggests otherwise.

But the reality is that racism in the 21st Century is much more complicated than that. You do not have to be a bad person with bad motivations to do things that harm, diminish, or insult people of color, because much of the racism we perpetuate and encounter today takes the form of exercising privilege.

At MTA we understand privilege as the benefits a person receives by being a member of a dominant group. In the case of racism, it is the benefits that white people receive simply because they are white. These benefits are almost always invisible to the people who benefit from them, and they make it almost impossible to understand the experiences or realities of someone who is not white and does not have the same privileges. Often the perspective of whiteness is not seen as a perspective at all, but as reality, and the privileges of whiteness are not seen as privileges, but as rights.

For example, we can talk about privilege and the police. Many white people see police as people who protect you and keep the peace (think about your everyday perspective in your community, not the perspective you take on in a large political protest setting). This view is normal to you because you don't have experience being harassed, chased, profiled or shot at by the police. If, however, you are a person of color living in a low-income neighborhood, police are people who harass you when you leave your house; who stop and frisk you without cause; who arrest you on a whim; or who shoot to kill over minor offenses.

In other words, growing up white makes it difficult to understand the experiences and realities of a person of color and their attitudes about the police. Furthermore, because white people make up the dominant culture, it is difficult for us to even recognize that our experience is not the sole -- to say nothing of the accurate -- reality.

And why is this important? Why does our unexamined privilege affect our ability to organize a democracy movement? It is important because our privilege affects how and what we can see. Therefore, if white, class-comfortable people build a movement, they will tend to build a movement of other white, class-comfortable people in which the experiences, needs and realities of people of color and poor people will be ignored, unseen, dismissed, or undermined.

A good recent example of this is the Occupy movement. The largely-white Occupy movement started

out with a lot of people who trusted that the police would be there to protect them and therefore valorized certain kinds of attitudes toward them. This not only alienated many people of color, it also came crashing down around the very white people who urged these attitudes as soon as they experienced police brutality. For the first time in many white people's lives, they had a glimpse of how many people of color have had to see police for decades.

This is not an essay about police brutality, however, and we should not get caught up in that discussion. It's an essay on addressing privilege within the Move to Amend movement. The reason that we have dwelled on examples is that we want to underscore how privilege affects movement building, social justice and winning. If we do not seek out, acknowledge, and centralize undoing racism in our movement, we will create a democracy that does not dismantle the full power structure, that does not stop suffering, and that does not create real justice. In other words, we will not have created a democracy at all.

For white, class-comfortable folks, it is easy to see the problem of corporate rule as simply a problem of corporate personhood and money in politics. That's because our lives were relatively OK before the influx of corporate money, and could be relatively better if we got rid of it. But for millions of people, there isn't a bygone era when things were better. For most non-white people of the world (including the United States), things have been very bad for a very long time.

That's why we must focus on recognizing and dismantling our privilege in the Move to Amend movement. It's not about guilt, it's about action and strategy. It's about being willing to try for meaningful and lasting change, and being willing to make mistakes and learn from them. If we want to build a real democracy, we have to have everyone, and if we want to secure justice, we have to know what kind we're after.

Dismantling our privilege is difficult, yes. It is a challenge. But it is also an opportunity. It is a chance to build real relationships with groups doing important work on the ground. It is a chance to understand how oppression works and how to be part of ending it. It is a chance to work on the impacts as well as the foundations of corporate rule. It's a chance to create world that is fundamentally different than the world that existed before it. It is a chance to secure our own liberation because no one is truly free if the system's foundation is oppression of others.

And it is a chance to build a movement so big, so powerful, and so capable that we have a fighting chance of winning.