Kali Akuno to Get 2023 Peace Award

written by Laura Schleifer | May 6, 2023

Promoting Enduring Peace's Program Chair Laura Schleifer presented the following speech at the Gandhi Peace Award announcement event on April 20th at the New Haven Library. The award will be given to Kali Akuno on May 13 at 2 P.M. Eastern Time at New Haven's Q-House. Attendance is free for both in-person and online (Zoom) guests.

Over the years, Promoting Enduring Peace has realized that creating *enduring* peace requires social justice. Decades ago, the Board voted to give this award to Martin Luther King Jr. Rev. Lucius Walker, Jr., Cesar Chavez, Daniel Ellsberg, and recent recipients, including the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement founder Omar Barghouti and peace activist Kathy Kelly.

Today, we have realized that not only does peace require justice, but the time for waiting for those in power to *provide* that justice has passed. It is time for people to create and implement ways of addressing the current social, economic and ecological crises ourselves. We need strategies that put the power directly into people's hands–especially those most severely impacted, disenfranchised and disempowered. In recognition of that paradigm shift, this year's Gandhi Peace Award recipient has been chosen for creating an innovative way of addressing these issues through collective action on the local level combined with a broader long-term strategy for regional, national, and global change. This year, Promoting Enduring Peace will give its Gandhi Peace Award to Kali Akuno and Cooperation Jackson.

In Kali Akuno and Cooperation Jackson, we have found a community of activists who exemplify our organization's mission of creating, "peace on earth, peace with earth". Kali and his fellow members of Cooperation Jackson are creating a model for how the rest of us might be able to achieve that goal by transforming our communities on the local level and then linking them together to create a new system that provides for human and ecological needs, and also recognizes the interdependence between the two.

Based in Jackson, Mississippi, one of the nation's poorest cities, Cooperation Jackson is a Black-led semi-autonomous community with a visionary plan "Jackson-Kush Plan" to build Black autonomy

throughout the U.S. South and eventually challenge and replace the current political and economic systems with a new system rooted in mutual aid, food sovereignty, community care, ecological regeneration, collective self-governance, land reclamation, community-controlled production, and cooperative and solidarity economics through its People's Network for Land and Liberation.

Historically, Black people in the United States have suffered, and continue to suffer, extreme housing, employment, healthcare, education, and food quality discrimination, in addition to being the victims of police brutality, resegregation and enslavement through the criminal injustice system. Additionally, Black communities are highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change due to collapsing infrastructure and insufficient disaster relief aid caused by lack of public investment in these communities, and the fact that they are often located in vulnerable ecological zones. Black communities are also the victims of environmental racism, as polluting industries locate themselves in regions where local populations are the most disempowered to push back against these practices.

In response to these injustices, Cooperation Jackson's Fanny Lou Hamer Community Land Trust, buys and restores vacant lots, abandoned homes, and unused business locations in order to remove them from real estate speculation and make them available to the community via creating off-grid housing that produces energy and treats waste on-site, parks, playgrounds, co-op business spaces, and other communal uses.

To address both economic inequality and the climate crisis and its impact on Black and other marginalized communities, Cooperation Jackson has created the Sustainable Communities Initiative, a "Green New Deal" for Jackson. Its Green Team provides quality, living wage jobs in ecological regeneration and community renewal. From running a worker-owned farm-to-table cafe/catering co., to creating community food gardens and providing a time-bank system where local residents receive fresh produce in exchange for volunteering. Cooperation Jackson is also preparing for a climate-uncertain future through its Regeneration Corps, which teaches high school students about the interrelationship between agroecology, food sovereignty, climate justice and racial equity, and how these issues interrelate, and through buying land in Vermont for climate refugees in more vulnerable zones to relocate to.

Cooperation Jackson's long-term goals include making Jackson a zero-emissions/zero-waste city, creating a local currency, and setting up an "eco-village" of co-ops engaged in projects like solar installation, waste management, community childcare, and arts and cultural development. Kali also served as Co-Director of the US Human Rights Network, and Executive Director of the New Orleans Peoples' Hurricane Relief Fund (PHRF) after Hurricane Katrina.

We believe that Kali and Cooperation Jackson are creating the conditions for a truly enduring peace on and with earth, and we could not be more proud and honored to help them with that mission.