Shifting Focus: Organizing for an Ecosocialist Future

written by Kali Akuno | July 1, 2023

[Kali Akuno, co-founder of Cooperation Jackson in Jackson, Mississippi, was given the 2023 Gandhi Peace Award by Promoting Enduring Peace. The award has been given since 1960 to individuals for "contributions made in the promotion of international peace and good will." Following are the remarks made by Akuno on May 13, 2023, in New Haven, lightly edited.]

First, thank all of you for coming and enduring this embarrassment. Much appreciated. Second, I'm really honored, truly honored to be receiving this award. I was very moved by actually seeing the carving in person and seeing the names [of past recipients since 1960]. I'd looked and studied, so I knew what was on there, but there's a difference, actually, to walk in and see it with your own name being mentioned along with so many people that you've learned from, studied, tried to emulate, from beginning to end of that list. So, I'm truly honored.

And then I want to give my thank yous, because it's an individual award to a degree, but you don't get here without there being a foundation and communities of people who've nurtured and enabled you to do what you do. And all those folks have to be honored and respected, because this is fundamentally, I would say, their award. And chief amongst those, to me, would be my momma. So, I want to make that plain. I would not be here without, first, her giving birth and doing that labor, but also, going through a lot of trying times with me growing up and us sharing in that together, and her figuring out to make our way when there was, at times, very little in terms of resources or what would appear to be hope. She always found some way to make it happen, and I've drawn from that very extensively. So, I wanted to give props to that and to all of the folks who helped her along the way.

Then I also wouldn't be here without those who are doing the reproductive work. I have two children, and my wife is at home now enabling me to do this and to be present. We often receive these things and many people get disappeared, particularly women in the course of doing work that enables us to be here, and talk trash with all of you, and share our experience. But that always has to be uplifted and acknowledged. So this is not something that's being awarded or received alone, and I just want to make that known.

You have the title, "Shifting Focus," which is what I want to talk about. But I want to put it a little bit in context and I know like I have a little bit of time, so I'm gonna be skipping around some things but I'm here with what I hope would be an urgent message. First, because of the nature of climate change. The time we actually have to plan and shift through things is rapidly declining. We need to be very clear about that. There is no model that any of the scientists now come up with which

actually matches reality. Right? So, we are in some ways in uncharted territory. What we witnessed in 2022 alone far exceeds almost any model or projection anybody talked about. So you witness, you know, Mozambique and Pakistan where huge portions of their countries were flooded, or major droughts being experienced from Madagascar to Somalia, to California in parts of the west. These are projections that people put off twenty, thirty, forty years from now. And if you look at what the nation states of the world are actually doing, they're acting as if we have a hundred years to solve this problem, when nothing could be further from the truth.

Now, part of what "Shifting Focus" means is asking us is to look at concrete reality profoundly differently. I want to bring up a couple things of what I mean to illustrate, because there's some obvious things that we've all experienced the last couple years that we should be really gleaning from and learning from and then acting upon, but I don't think we fully recognize. And let me say one. We all lived through 2020, everybody who's here. And you will recall that the nation-states of the world during the early part of the pandemic, they were able to bring global commerce pretty much to a standstill. Now what's the significance of that? I've been doing climate justice work since the '80s, but particularly since 1992. I was one of the youth people who got to participate in some of the planning formations of what winded up becoming the Rio Conference that happened in 1992, the so-called Earth Summit. That was supposedly the first major UN conference about climate change. We've been told since then that the world economy and the world system is too complex and too large for it to be altered in any fundamental way. That the problem is so big that there is no way to tackle it.

You all just witnessed that when there's political urgency, when there's political expedience to do so, they can pivot on the drop of a dime. You witnessed that. You've experienced that. So, there is no ability for them to lie to us, again, to claim that it's too complex, it's too large, it's too dynamic a system to be altered. We have witnessed in real time that they can do it. In real time.

In addition to seeing that we have to acknowledge that there are political consequences, there are political actions that did have to be taken to make sure that they actually can fulfill the demands of the people that require the system to change.

That is where the gap is. We are not demanding what needs to be demanded. That is a weakness on our end, that we need to recognize. There are some shifts required in our own consciousness. Because what that in part exhibits to me—and I'm not trying to be harsh but to be real—I think we envision in our minds that the end of the world is more possible than changing the capitalist system. And if we hold that to be true, then we won't build the movements that are necessary to change the future and to create a new future. So, there's a battle for our own minds that has to take place in the here and now.

If you just think that's one shallow example, let me give you another one. Whether you agree or not that this was an ideal program, it speaks to the potential of what can be done under the right circumstances with the right leadership. From April 2020 to September 2021, you all lived through, basically, a universal basic income experience. The U.S. government along with most Western governments gave out trillions of dollars to folks to keep the global economy alive in the form of various types of cash payments, tax write-offs, etc. And it became so profound that status quo types basically led a Congressional revolt to end it and they tried to end it on the basis that folks were making more money from this disbursement than they were working full-time jobs. And what was the argument? We'd rather have folks working for less, to discipline labor, than to give out resources that have already been dispersed. So, it's not a question of whether there are sufficient resources. When the need arises, they basically can print all the paper money that they want. At least the United States government is still in the position to be able to do that. So, the question then becomes: why don't they? And part of that is we aren't demanding it, we aren't organized enough to make that

demand, and that's a challenge that we have to take.

So, the "Shifting Focus" is, let us actually look to reality, as it is, not how we want it to be, and then we need to organize based upon that. Now, some of the things I'm proposing appear in a document we put out, "The Build and Fight Formula."[i] And what that basically is, is calling us to realize is that if we look at our self-organized activity—those of you in this room, speaking to you—if we look at our self-organized activity, we're actually doing a whole lot. And we think a lot of times that what we're doing is insufficient. And if we just look at what we're doing, and not the aggregate of what everybody in our community is doing, then, yes, it is insufficient. I don't know New Haven that well, but I would imagine that they are a good number of community farms, urban farming projects that are going on. And if you link that up with the agriculture work that's being done in and around this region, you have the outlines of a local, at least, food-security network. But the issue is that you have this level of production and all this stuff going on, but they're not coordinated. It's not being planned. We're not dialoguing with each other enough to come up with a plan to answer the question of what are the concrete kinds of food and caloric needs in our community? How can we produce towards those needs and then how can we distribute based upon those needs? That requires us to be first and foremost in dialogue with each other, building a level of trust with each other. And that can be done without in any way surrendering any of anybody's autonomy to do what they want to do.

Communicating with you about, "Hey you're planting tomatoes, I'm planting corn. I don't want you to give up what you're doing, but can we coordinate and is this enough to maybe add a little bit more to what you're doing, add a little bit more to what I'm doing and then let's come up with the community levels of engagement to be able to provide this where it is most needed, particularly those who don't have market access or don't have the resources necessarily to go to the market so that we can at least eliminate the threat of hunger from our communities." And once we eliminate those type of threats, you free up people's minds, time, and energy for them to be able to do other things, to start constructing peace. Because a lot of what we know on a base level, I can tell you from my experience, a lot of the struggles going on in the streets are because folks don't have sufficient resources to meet their basic needs. And once some of those needs are addressed and corrected and people's behavior oriented to different things, other things become possible right.

And then let me talk about peace and security. The reality that we know is that the communities that have "the most peace" are those that are the most resourced. And where there's more stress and strain from other resources, that is where you find a kind of proverbial violence. But we need to look at the violence that's actually constructed on the front end which keeps us all in isolation in the first place. The whole practice of setting up a system that encloses the commons and then puts people against each other, that was the first critical act of violence that we have to work to undo. So, when you hear about elements of our program about why we spend so much time and energy trying to build like our community land trust, and wonder why we made that a priority. It was first and foremost, we got to take that out of the speculative market to enable some other things to happen so folk have a basic line of resources that they can tap into, some place where folks in the community can come and say I want to do a plot to take care of some of my particular needs. We now have enough resources to at least start within our community, for a program like that to be built upon and expanded upon for some years. And this is something that we want to encourage everybody to take up and do.

And there are other practices like this that we want to put out within this formula that are built upon these links to each other that enable us to get outside of commodity relations on a practical community level to build more resources and more autonomy in our communities.

But it requires a mental shift, and part of that mental shift is that I need to communicate, I need to

plan, and coordinate with others in my community, so that we start working together on a more coordinated level without necessarily removing anybody's autonomy. That's a core piece of what this program is saying, that we want to shift how we practice. I'm not really interested in having a whole bunch of ideological and political debates with you. What I'm more interested in is how do we work beyond our differences to meet our material needs. And there's a philosophy that's embedded in this which is that we think it's easier to work ourselves into new way of thinking than it is to think ourselves into new ways of acting. And then if we are really working with each other that convergence will kind of eliminate a lot of the political things that we think kind of get in the way when it's really anchored and oriented towards meeting particular needs. Because your reasons for wanting to serve somebody's needs don't have to be my reasons. We don't have to agree on that one hundred percent. But if we agree that people's needs need to be met, that's the baseline, that's the starting point. We can unite on that, and then there's just some other principles, such as that we won't discriminate in terms of who gets what.

That's the negative discrimination. But we can also do some positive discrimination. And that means, like, I want to make sure the children and elderly get fed. Do you agree upon that? That's a democratic decision. We want to make sure the people who aren't able to be out here farming because of certain physical disabilities also get served as a priority. We can agree upon that.

And it does require folks to kind of shift their worldview because I think all of us have some baseline of what we want to get to. The question is: are we engaged in enough work with each other to build up the trust and communication to enable that to happen, and that is what the big part of the shift really requires. When you look at that, you got to think about what are the organizing pieces and what are the social relationships that are going to be necessary to make this happen. And one of the biggest weaknesses of progressive forces right now is that we don't talk to each other enough, and we're too fragmented in our political views. Or, you know, "somebody said something bad to me ten years ago or thirty years ago and I can't talk to them or don't want to talk to them." Fine, you don't have to talk to them, but you can plan. We go through other folks. Can we get to that particular point? So that is really what we're pushing out.

I'll leave with my final argument, that if we get to this level of dialogue and communication working toward these autonomies, we'll be able to basically withstand some of the onslaught that's coming our way.

You know, there's this nice techno-future stuff that's being dumped on all of us. So, you've got Elon Musk who wants to go to Mars. Y'all not invited, but he's gonna keep preaching about it. He's gonna take all your money to get there, but y'all not invited. Then you got Jeff Bezos who's talking about making the Earth a nature preserve. If y'all don't believe me, actually go and listen to what the man says. He says he wants to move all the dirty polluting industries to the moon, right, move a significant number of people to outer space colonies and then let the Earth heal. Now think about, how you gonna move eight billion people to the moon? You quickly realize that we can't put two people up there sufficiently now, so his plan requires massive depopulation, that's the underscore of what he's really talking about. And I will wager folks that look like me ain't included in his small club, or at least not too many of us. And God help those who do get chosen, because they're probably going to be cleaning the joint. So that's what his thinking is, but this is what they're really putting out there. Now, I'm not saying this as a joke, I'm saying this concretely in terms of what's being thought.

So, if the captains of industry are supposed to save us, which is what the neoliberal order of the world purports to us, we should just go along and let them do all the planning and thinking. Well, if that's the case, there's no future for us, so we've got to make the future ourselves. That's why this dialogue and this planning is so critical and essential.

And there is a certain baseline of skills that we need to have in our community. Plumbing. Woodwork. Craft work. Things that appear to be old. A lot of those things are gonna be the skills that we need in the future. And I'm not saying something fictitious. I want y'all to understand we live in a profound period of unsteady reality. Look at what's going on in Pakistan right now, how unstable it is rapidly becoming. Pakistan is a nuclear power. That means if it completely collapses, those nuclear weapons could wind up being on a bunch of markets that anybody can use. A similar dynamic, I would argue to a different degree, is going on in Russia. Let's say Russia becomes a failed state, not that it's a thriving one now, but let's say it becomes a failed state. What happens to their nuclear stockpile?

I'm bringing this back to the award because it started in part around nuclear proliferation. It may appear on a certain level that that threat is off the horizon. I would argue with everyone here it's not, that it is very much back on the horizon and is being pushed. Because another part of this we've got to pay attention to is this big thrust that the United States government, both parties, are pushing toward war with China and a new program of encirclement around China. They're not just going to sit back and take that willingly. And both of them have interests which I would argue go against the interests of humanity.

So how do we interject and move as people who are not part of either of these nation-state apparatuses, to ensure that there's a lasting peace? We've got to get much more organized to be able to exert pressure and influence when and where we can and get prepared for the future. We've got a lot of work to do.

The good thing is in periods of uncertainty such as this is that there's a tremendous amount of opportunity. So don't walk away from here thinking everything is gloom and doom. The ruling class factions of the planet are very unsure about what to do right now. All they have is a bunch of short-term fixes. So, the more we get coordinated, united, we have much more of an opportunity to actually create what we want than we could possibly imagine. One of the biggest things is just the limitations in our mind and I just want you to remember: profound quick change is possible. You witnessed it.

And it could change in an intentional way. That's the critical piece. Like the Great Resignation. Imagine if we organized that and it wasn't just spontaneous. Think about how much leverage and power we would have. So, if we know what's happening, what is stopping us from getting ahead of it and to start organizing?

All my union comrades out there, there should be some serious conversation in each of your unions, about how we actually build upon this momentum. What type of education work, what type of actual contact and organizing work is necessary to be out there? You folks need to be thinking about your survival, as an organized unit in the face of declining membership over the last 50 years. There is a profound opportunity to expand basic union organizing and to make it a serious political force in the United States, and globally, once again.

But it just takes a shift in imagination and then being able to engage in a little risk taking to try to go get out there and talk to people and start getting them organized and meeting their collective interests. We can do it. It's going to take some hard work. It's going to take some new imagination. But it can be possible. It is possible. We just need to make it happen.