

Field Notes for transformation



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PATTI LYNN | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Collective liberation: Ending systemic anti-Black racism and challenging corporate power

Dear friend,

I’m very grateful for the recent conversations I’ve had with members like you about structural racism. Together and separately, we’ve been sitting with the brutality that marked the end of the lives of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many other Black people in recent months. I’ve been holding deeply the toll that anti-Black racism takes on people and on this society. I know with certainty that I must do far more to end it.

A longtime colleague and mentor, Akili, who has been organizing for Black lives since the civil rights movement, reminds me that the human cost of the deeper, broader awakening happening in this country around anti-Black racism is too high. The loss of each Black life is too costly. Black people can no longer continue to pay this high price to make real change.

It is in holding this reality in our minds and hearts that our Corporate Accountability community is moving forward, embracing the truth that the work to end anti-Black racism is a moral imperative for us all.

While the events of the summer brought this important and long-overdue moment of reckoning, we know the sustained work of ending systemic anti-Black racism lies ahead of us. We are being more intentional and explicit in acknowledging how ending anti-Black racism is inseparable from challenging corporate power and the economic system that upholds it. We are committed to engaging in anti-racism work for the long haul. It is all about fundamentally transforming systems of power, which in the end will create a better world for everyone.

Reining in corporate power requires ending systemic racism

The wealth and economic prosperity of the U.S. was built by the forced labor of enslaved Black people on colonized land violently stolen from Indigenous people. And from the start, corporations played a role in upholding slavery and entrenching colonialism—in the U.S. and globally.

While the Plymouth Company, Virginia Company, London Company, and other early colonial corporations might have looked different from contemporary transnational corporations, they served a similar purpose. In the U.S. they helped concentrate power and wealth in the hands of white men at the expense of Black and Indigenous people and the Earth. And many of today's major corporations have benefited from the U.S. slave trade—from JP Morgan Chase to New York Life Insurance Company, the largest mutual life insurance company in the United States.

The prosperity and power of other Global North countries also come from colonialism, imperialism, and extractive capitalism, in which Black and Indigenous people and people of color were, and continue to be, violently treated as expendable and exploitable. The abuses of Royal Dutch Shell in Nigeria and the East India Company in India and China quickly come to mind.

Examining this history shows us how deeply systemic racism and corporate power are intertwined, then and now. Today, corporations pollute and poison the air and land of communities of color—leading to health disparities that put Black people more at risk for COVID-19 and other diseases. They violate the rights of and abuse low-wage workers (most of whom identify as Black, Indigenous, and people of color). And corporations reap enormous profit from the prison-industrial complex—whether that's profiting directly from running private prisons, exploiting the needs of people in prison and their families, creating and implementing surveillance systems, or a myriad of other ways corporations make money off of the mass incarceration of Black people.

Now is the moment to leap into change

Being committed to reining in corporate power means we must be equally committed to dismantling systemic racism. And if there was ever a moment to make progress on both of these issues, it's now.

The uprisings in June were made possible by the political, cultural, and organizing work of the Movement for Black Lives, Black Lives Matter Global, and hundreds of grassroots organizations, artists, and educators. And it was built on the decades-long organizing for Black liberation. But this summer, I was particularly

struck by how the progressive movement in the U.S. came together in ways that I have not seen in my 25 years of organizing. Organizations and movements across issues joined together to put their weight and resources to support and uplift demands by Black organizers. Given the proclivity of the U.S. left to splinter and divide, this is significant.

The systems we currently live under are beginning to show their cracks, and people are coming together in new ways. A surprising percentage of white American adults—60% in a June Pew Research Center poll—are supporting the uprisings for Black lives. And the Movement for Black Lives and other Black leaders are pointing out the ways that extractive capitalism and corporate power collude in anti-Black racism.

As a lifelong organizer, I can see that this moment is the one I have been working toward my whole life. Many of you have expressed similar sentiments. Which means that we all need to keep showing up with our time and resources to do the work.

Corporate Accountability must continue to engage with Black-led organizing in the struggle to end systemic racism—whether there's a specific connection to corporate abuse or not. We're engaging in this work externally through our campaigns and internally on our organizational leadership, processes, and culture.

It will free us all

And let's be clear. This isn't about "helping Black people." As the renowned civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer said in 1971, "Nobody's free until everybody's free."

I am inspired by the work of Black feminists like Hamer and those who formed the Combahee River Collective. In the 1970s, the collective formed to center the experiences and analysis of Black feminists. It was a space away from racism in the white feminist movement as well as the sexism in the Black liberation movement and the white-male-dominated left. In their groundbreaking statement, they wrote: "If Black women were free it would mean that everyone else would have to be free, since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression." Today, I read "women" in this statement to include cisgender and transgender women, femmes of all genders, and gender nonconforming people.

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None of us are free in a system where we are valued only for our economic output—whether that’s our labor, our minds, our bodies, our capital, our land, or our time. We must work to create a society where corporations are unable to make billions from incarcerating people, unable to dump pollution into Black communities or any communities, unable to steal land and profit from it, unable to trample on human rights, and unable to exploit workers and consumers.

In other words, ending systemic anti-Black racism will mean creating a transformative shift in the power structures that have created such an unjust world. It will mean corporations can no longer abuse people and the planet for their profit. It will mean our collective liberation.

This is the world we dream of together. It’s not quick work with easy solutions. It’s not about aiming for moderate reform; it’s about demanding and doing the work toward truly transformative change. We are in it for the long haul. And I’m honored to be in it with you. Thank you for your thoughtful engagement with us, for your commitment, and for traveling with us on the road toward collective liberation.



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