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On Ebonics, Strawberries, and the Ever Lowering Standard of Living

In the past five months since the Oakland School District made its controversial Ebonics decision, liberals everywhere have been tooting their bleeding horns in unison to the tune of: *But how are these poor black kids EVER going to get ahead if they can't speak English properly?* Without even fully understanding what (or who) this decision was about, most professional commentators, including Ellen Goodman and Christopher Hitchens, jumped the gun, denounced the decision, and hoped to come off as the saviors of the inner city's lost youth. The syndicated pundits, always on the hunt for a hot seller were quick to pounce on what seemed like easy prey. But what was most conspicuous in all the hoopla over what should have been a self-evident non-issue was the middle class snobbery and condescension that most commentators openly exhibited. Barely disguised as a sort of social pragmatism, the implication was that unless you learn to speak like us (bourgeois lingo-prudes) you are doomed to economic and social failure.

But a wonderful thing happened on the way to the United Farm Worker's march, where close to 30,000 workers joined together in a massive demonstration in Watsonville, CA on April 13. What happened was that busloads of Oakland's working people mostly from UAW, brought themselves, Ebonics and all, down to march in solidarity with the UFW. Their presence, as well as the presence of unions from across the country, was a timely reminder for everyone that labor is the issue that brings all strands of this debate together. The slogan of unionized labor has been "a decent wage, dignity, respect:" Nowhere in that phrase does it say, "using standard English." What many so-called progressives have seemingly forgotten is that the struggle is NOT to yuppify the land. The struggle is NOT to make it an either/or situation: either you walk, talk, and wear your white collar, or you work for 7-11 for \$ 4.50 an hour. In an in-egalitarian society such as ours, the primary struggle is NOT to raise the people's standard of English; the *primary* struggle is to raise the people's standard of living. By using these scare tactics, i.e.: "conform or die," these

self-appointed defenders of the people are undermining the legitimate fight for dignity and equality *across class lines*.

This is certainly not to suggest that all African-Americans are part of, or need to remain part of the working class. Nor do all African Americans speak or want to speak ‘Ebonics.’ But what must be acknowledged is that Ebonics isn’t only a race issue anyway, but almost uniformly a question of class; and middle class Blacks felt deeply offended at the suggestion otherwise. So all the backlash (and cynical jokes and web pages) against Ebonics boil down to yet another jab that bourgeois society is taking at the poor. What many folks have forgotten is that the so-called “urban underclass” used to be a strong and vibrant working class until the economic rug was pulled out; and cheap drugs pumped in. From Reagan’s systematic union busting and the elimination of family farming in the eighties; to Downsizing, NAFTA, and the exportation of all the jobs in the nineties; and then the plan to cut all welfare by the end of the millennium, Corporate America has repeatedly stabbed the black community in the back. It stabs and jabs, then it keeps up the vicious taunt, “What’s the matter with you? Why can’t you get up? Why don’t you want to be like us?”

The public debate over Ebonics proved yet again that this nation has become a mediocracy, with no visible or viable challenges to the unrelenting power of mainstream cynicism. The issue was used by the media as yet another distraction, one more comic strip, one more ruse to fool us into thinking about things in *their* terms, in that bland, meaningless “pro/con” framework. A lot of snobs both black and white also used the opportunity to cheaply dismiss grassroots youth culture, rap especially. What was lost, even on the left, in the rush to judgment was the sense that people have a right to a decent life no matter what they look or sound like. Ebonics was a litmus test for many members of the progressive community who still haven’t understood their own terminology of diversity and multiculturalism. And it became only too clear that the physical and emotional distance between the well-heeled white-collar commentators and the Ebonics speakers or migrant farm workers was too vast to cross in glib articles published in the

Vanity Fair and elsewhere. And that distance is the crime. It's not a crime to speak your own language, your home language, the language of your family, roots, and culture. It IS a crime to keep penalizing people for not living according to a false standard of excellence.

Right wing ideologues used to make a hobby of saying that Soviet-style socialism was going to homogenize society irreparably. The fear, or accusation, was that "We are all going to be forced to be the same!" But ironically, now that the Soviet Union has collapsed, we are enduring a sort of Capitalist free-for-all; and the possibility that people are soon going to be social clones is becoming more imminent. Indeed, Capitalism would have us all shopping for the same clothes and toys at the same superstores, buying the same cola, reading the same news, validating the same Earth destroying infrastructures—all of this orchestrated by a handful of powerful corporations. In such an ideologically controlled environment is it any wonder then that a simple decision to validate and understand Black ways of speaking could create such an uproar? What happened to diversity? What happened to tolerance? What happened to fight the system?! The message, which most commentators tacitly agreed with, was: It's okay to wear your colors in the alienation of your own home, but when you are out in the world you better do as the white world wants.

But again, a wonderful thing happened at the UFW march. We saw thousands upon thousands of participants, Aztec dancers, Native drummers, avant-garde theater groups, Asian women garment workers, European and African Americans from all over the country coming together to fight for justice for migrant strawberry pickers. Here was a real event where colorful culture and dissenting economics met in a powerful way. From immigrant farm and factory workers, to inner city service workers, to teachers to teamsters, all of those present were saying "no" to the business as usual which keeps fellow humans in a state of deprivation and suffering. In the midst of a Wall Street worshipping world which continues to favor profit over people, this rally sent a battle cry:

economic justice is an absolute priority and the cornerstone of peace, education, and every sort of human advancement.

The fact that all children are entitled to and should aspire to an empowering education is as obvious as the fact that poor people are always at the short end of the educational stick. Now even the left seems to want to use that stick to beat people into compliance, telling not asking Blacks, Hispanics, etc. to join the boring, unjust club called late Capitalism. But it is late, and the point is that *all* people should be able to maintain their cultural and linguistic heritage and still be able to support their families, own a home, retire to somewhere other than the streets. Instead of mocking the desperate measures which predominantly poor school districts pass in an attempt to close the educational gap, those in the business of making comments should perhaps stand back for a while. Perhaps they should just tone down until they learn some basic standard Ebonics themselves such as “Black is beautiful” or even some useful Spanish phrases like “Venceremos” and “Si se puede!”