

# INDYPENDENT READER

*toward building a new society on the vacant lots of the old . . .*

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## Common Purpose, Uncommon Approach

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Following the events of the B'More Fair and Human Rights Zone March held on April 18 in Baltimore City, Rev. Heber Brown III wrote some powerful words on his blog Faith in Action about the day, writing that “without exaggeration, was the most organized, diverse, and strategic community activism event that I have ever been a part of in this city.” These are powerful words from an experienced and already committed community organizer and leader. Rev. Brown’s words say a lot about the many people who made April 18 happen, adding meaning to the day’s community fair and solidarity march from Carroll Park to the Inner Harbor, where low-wage workers demanded respect and dignity at work.

Rev. Brown’s words are also humbling words for those who came together to carry out the work of the day’s activities; humbling because the hundreds of people who made April 18 happen hold incredible responsibility as leaders and participants in the building of our history together. This responsibility is especially great if what we did moves the city to a new level of organizing and community building. Rev. Brown’s words call for deep reflection. We should be clear about what, why, and how April 18 happened. We should also reflect on what can and should follow next. If we are on the path to building some kind of power, if this is truly the case, then we should understand

the implications that will follow from building this kind of power. Creating history together is sacred work and requires the deepest reflection, given the great power that can come from such work and the need for justice to be realized everywhere.

On first reading of Rev. Brown's reflection about April 18 I was reminded of a reflection posted by the United Workers on its blog following the Allies and Advisers Gathering, held on the Saturday before Martin Luther King Day earlier in the year, at which the planning process for the B'More Fair was set in motion. Over 90 community organizers from different organizations, faith communities, and unions met and decided on the theme and overall vision for the B'More Fair. Later that week the United Workers wrote that the gathering "may not have felt all that historic to those of us who were there as we prayed together, met in small groups, and ate soup and sandwiches together. The day may have easily felt more mundane than momentous. But what we did on this day was build our future history, and on reflection that can be nothing less than truly momentous." Given that the gathering was held on the same day that then President-Elect Obama visited the city on his way to the inauguration, we can draw a distinction between these two events and ask the question: Which event contributes more to the future of ending poverty and realizing our city's full potential?

The planning, or the history building, for the B'More Fair and Human Rights Zone March started long before the gathering on the weekend before Martin Luther King Day. It started long before the Allies and Advisers Gathering, long before the City from Below Conference that helped kick off outreach efforts beyond Baltimore, and long before April 18 culminated with the announcement of the worst employer at Baltimore's Inner Harbor. The power that made both the Allies and Advisers Gathering and April 18 possible was created in thousands of small actions across decades of time, carried out long before the day itself or before it was even thought of in the minds of those who first proposed it. It was made by the members of the Red Emma's collective coming together years ago to start building a vibrant community space for reflection and action. It was made by the expansion of that collective to include the 2640 Space, providing more space for countless other projects and acts of solidarity. It was made in sermons by faith leaders like Rev. Brown and Rev. Roger Scott Powers. It was made in tens of thousands of house visits by unions and community organizers. It was made in peer to peer tutoring sessions, in protests to demand life in education and in a hunger strike to compel the mayor to respect the human right of this city's young people in need of humanizing education.

April 18 was made possible by SMEAC, Algebra Project and dozens of other community organizations who organize the poor as leaders. It was made by farm-workers in Immokalee Florida who are developing and acting on a model of community organizing that can be applied in Baltimore and elsewhere, by media makers in Philadelphia organizing to end poverty, by poverty scholars around the world thinking and teaching a way out of the conditions that cause poverty's continuation, and by visionaries in Pittsburgh standing in solidarity with workers in all parts of the world. The history written on April 18 was made possible by independent journalists creating spaces for sharing ideas and lessons learned with the community, who help bring all these forces together so that we can grow, adapt and act in unity and solidarity for the purpose of expanding

unconditional love to all aspects of human existence. The many people and organizations who made April 18 happen, over decades of time and in thousands of actions big and small, is a reflection that community power comes in large part from community diversity.

We are stronger when we realize that common purpose does not require common approach. Regardless of outcome related to diversity, we also know that common purpose based on the inherent worth and dignity of life requires respect for diversity, because there is no humanity in everything being the same. For me, the value of diversity stems in part from my belief that each person is created not only in the image of God, but is also blessed with the gift of free will. Having been granted the power to act in absolute liberty, even if in sin, there is diversity in thought and action, a direct outcome of this cherished and sacred gift from God. For myself and others, diversity is also valued not necessarily in one's belief on the origins of humanity, but from deep love for the uniqueness of each human being, or in the diversity stemming from the wonders of life's code and the intersection between design and experience. Moreover, growth is not possible without diversity, because construction requires conflict, sharing, multiple forms of expression, competing ideas, and the purposeful cultivation of diverse community.

April 18 was an incredible experience because of those who came together to make it happen, to express our strength, and to reflect on our diversity through action and reflection together. One look around at the B'More Fair and it was clear how strong and vibrant our community is, and how blessed we are to be part of this community. With over 50 community organizations tabling at the B'More Fair, from Team Trans to UNITE HERE, there was a lot to celebrate on that day. Walking through the fair, I heard conversations ranging from environmental justice to the abolition of the prison system. Groups present included those working in solidarity with soldiers standing up against the oppression of war, those building and expanding community radio to give voice to the once voiceless, and homeless persons fighting for equitable health care for all. People were engaging, listening, talking, sharing, and singing about shared purpose. Culture was constructed through song, puppet making, debate, food, and low-powered community radio. This was powerfully illustrated when students from Students for Worker Justice and members of a radical community marching band led folks to the start of the Human Rights Zone March after participants listened to testimonials about human rights struggles throughout the city. We asserted these values in the solidarity stops at Camden Yards, outside of the State Department of Education, at the City Center Sheraton, near the BGE offices, and at City Hall. Our voices came together in celebration as we marched from Carroll Park, through Pig Town and downtown, and to the Human Rights Zone at the Inner Harbor.

After the events of April 18, Veronica Dorsey, another member of the United Workers Staff Collective, told me that what was most powerful for her was that "friends in all shapes, sizes, and colors came together on April 18. We were all human beings on that day because we came together to make it so. We celebrated life, including having fun together." Veronica also told me that for this to happen "there had to be solidarity and collective action so that our voice was heard. What we did on April 18 was get heard in this way, and I felt real community pride and also love amongst the people together, even with the people that I just met for the first time on that day."

April 18 was one step. It was taken by hundreds and was the result of the dedicated and sacred work carried out by leaders across color lines, classes, languages and all other barriers. Let's keep walking down this path together, in love and solidarity.

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