

September 2013

An open letter to white North Carolinians,

We are writing to you, as white people ourselves, to issue a call for solidarity.

We are living in a historic moment. As white people, we must consider what stories we want our grand- and great-grandchildren to tell. Do we want them to tell stories of how we colluded with legislators in Raleigh who delight in their game of divide and conquer while they continue to target Black, Brown, and poor people? Or do we want them to tell stories of how we fought for a state where everyone can thrive?

As we write this letter, our state legislators have eliminated health care for tens of thousands of children while giving tax breaks to the rich and increasing taxes on those of us least able to pay. They've undermined our teacher workforce and our public school system. They've passed the country's most restrictive and hateful abortion laws. And they've made a mockery of voting rights, ensuring that thousands will lose voice at the ballot box. These laws and policies hurt all of us and disproportionately hurt people and communities of color.

They do this under the direction and at the bidding of the American Legislative Exchange Council, an outsider group running a corporate agenda that promotes profit for a few at the expense of millions of North Carolinians, including most of us.

Our legislators are able to do this because they are counting on us, as white people, to collude. They tell stories that seem reasonable enough on the surface while underneath, hidden in age-old racist codes, they appeal to our conditioned fears.

For example, they tell a story that their passage of the most restrictive voting law in the country is about preventing voter fraud. While on the surface this sounds eminently sensible, what they don't say, won't say, would never admit, is that our state has essentially no record of voter fraud. The true aim of this law is to prevent people of color – especially African Americans, Latino/as, and Indigenous peoples – as well as poor people of all races from participating in the democratic process. Our legislators know they only stay in power with our votes. So they count on us, as white people, to act out of an internalized sense that we're more "legitimate" than those without easy access to IDs. They count on us to believe that the repression of Black and Brown voices at the ballot box is either in our interests or not our concern.

Our legislators tell a story that cutting unemployment benefits, slashing access to health care for poor people, and giving tax breaks to the rich is about creating a more "business friendly" state. This also sounds sensible; they have trained us well to believe that what's good for business is good for us. What they don't say, won't say, would never admit, is that what's good for business is good for them, not us, and particularly not those of us whose labor is undervalued and underpaid, which is most of us. They know the only thing that threatens a "profit at all costs" agenda is when working and poor people come together across race lines to fight. So again they count on us, as white people, to swallow the "good

for business” story while we ignore the ways in which that story hurts our Black and Brown neighbors even worse than it hurts us.

Our legislators extend this “good for business “ story to loosen or erase laws and policies designed to preserve our state’s environment. What they don’t say, won’t say, would never admit, is that they are counting on us, as white people, to ignore how the environmental price is always paid first by poor Black and Brown communities. They are counting on those of us in the mainstream white-led environmental movement to continue defining “environment” so narrowly that we repeatedly shut out and abandon communities of color, leaving us unable to cross critical race divides that would actually make the environmental movement much stronger.

Our legislators tell a story that parents should have the right to choose the best schools for their children. This story, like the others, seems compelling. What they don’t say, won’t say, would never admit, is that establishing a system of vouchers and charters benefits wealthy white communities the most because these communities can afford to supplement state funding. This leaves underfunded public schools as dumping grounds for poor Black and Brown children, as well as for poor white children who have no other options. Legislators carry out this destruction of public education by blaming already underpaid teachers for failing to cure the poverty the corporate “profit at all costs” agenda has created. They target teacher pay and benefits, making it hard for anyone to enter or stay in this critical profession. They do this by counting on our silence, as white people, assuming we will continue to support the growing segregation of our schools, ignoring the damage this does to our children and to us.

Our legislators pass the most restrictive abortion laws in the country, telling a story that these restrictions are about keeping women safe. This seems not only sensible, but chivalrous. What they don’t say, won’t say, would never admit, is they count on our misguided perception, those of us who are white and middle class, that those most concerned with protecting legal abortion are other white, middle class women like us. They understand too well how this pits many of us against Black and Brown women and children whose safety has never been a legislative priority. Women of color and their children have experienced decades of unsafe health care, including state ordered sterilization. Legislators delight in using our recurring failure to link abortion rights to the broader issues of reproductive justice to widen the already tragic gap separating us from our Black and Brown sisters.

Our legislators target immigrants, telling a familiar story that people must come here “legally” and they should not be allowed to steal our already scarce jobs. Again, how sensible this seems. What they don’t say, won’t say, would never admit is they are counting on us to be ignorant of the racist history of immigration law, which has always made it easier for our white ancestors to come here “legally.” They expect us to go along with the well-worn strategy of making criminals of people forced to leave their home countries in Central and South America (and beyond) because US military, trade and lending policies has devastated these countries’ economies. They expect us to both ignore how we economically exploit the hard labor of these immigrants and simultaneously blame them for “taking” jobs.

They appeal to our conditioned racist fears, knowing how these fears keep us separated from people who come here for the same reasons our ancestors did.

Our legislators target the LGBTQ community, introducing, among other measures, a constitutional amendment to forbid marriage equality. What they don't say, won't say, and would never admit, is how they want to drive a wedge between the LGBTQ and African American communities, counting on us, as white people, to collude in the idea that these are two separate populations and that the African-American community is more homophobic than the white community. They know that a focus on marriage rights instead of on [the need for health care outside of legal partnerships, for LGBTQ workplace rights, for schools where young people are protected from homophobic violence](#), widens the racial divide, as our Black and Brown LGBTQ neighbors continue to be disproportionately criminalized and targeted.

We are too easily tricked. Our state "leaders" heatedly deny they are racist or have racist intent, distract us with useless arguments about who is and is not racist, counting on us to buy into the idea that if they say they aren't racist, then racism must not be happening. [The time has come for us to wake up](#). We are calling on you, white North Carolinians, to see through their race coded speech and recognize that we have more in common with those in the Black and Brown community than we do with the white men masquerading as leaders in our state house.

The late white civil rights activist Anne Braden, in her letter to Southern white women in 1972, explained that "in an exploitive society, there are always two sides. And at some point, one must choose." The late Florence Reece, a daughter of white coal miners, composed a song for the historic Harlan County coal strike where she asked: ["Which side are you on?" This is our time to answer that question.](#)

[Where will we put our camaraderie, our resources, our love?](#) How will we work together so that we are not so predictably divided by racism? Too often, we are misled to believe that, as white people, we are not directly affected by laws and policies that target people and communities of color first. If we do not begin to understand that we are all in this together, then we are looking at a very lonely future indeed. Our state's history is too full of stories of lost fights for voting, environmental, women's, workers' and LGBTQ rights -- fights we've lost by our inability as white people to see the toll that racism takes on our Black and Brown neighbors and on us.

We can make a different choice. In truth, [we are only as happy, safe, and secure as our neighbors](#). We can and must work together to help each other not only survive, but thrive, to dismantle systems that do not serve us, and to build institutions and communities that honor our interdependence.

We are fortunate that in this assault on poor and working people, on people and communities of color, [we can look to a proud history of statewide and community-based organizations living into a faithful and tireless commitment to reject these divisive tactics](#). Please join us on the right side of this battle for the heart and soul of our state. For

example, the NC NAACP is holding Forward Together rallies in every district of the state over the next months. Democracy NC is organizing voter education efforts. If you're not already involved, look around your community and see where you can show up. We have a lot of work to do; please join us and join in.

With deepest respect,
Tema Okun, Jade Brooks, Beth Bruch, Jes Kelley, Anthony Maglione

Signed in support,
Patricia Adams, Jade Brooks, Bridgette Burge, Keagha Carscallen,
Genna Cohen, Kristen Cox, Tammerie Day, Jonathan Henderson,
Carol Hermann, Kate Troxler Mitchell, Marjorie Scheer, Elliott
Turnbull, Valerie Warren

This letter is written in the spirit of Angelina Grimké's Appeal to the Christian Women of the South, published by the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1836, the only written appeal made by a Southern white woman to other Southern white women regarding the abolition of slavery. This letter is also written in the spirit of Anne Braden's 1972 "A letter to white Southern women," a plea to white women of the South to join a campaign to free Thomas Wansley, a young Black man who spent a decade in prison on a fabricated rape charge.

Those writing and signing this letter are members of the white caucus sponsored by DismantlingRacismWorks (dRworks), a NC-based collaborative working for racial justice and equity. For more information about dRworks and our upcoming October workshop, visit our [website](http://www.dismantlingracism.org) at www.dismantlingracism.org.