A DECADE OF STRUGGLE- FORWARD STILL !

The Making Of A Grassroots Organization



ORGANIZATION FOR BLACK STRUGGLE

1980 - 1990

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Cover Photo by Marti Frumhoff

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FOREWORD

As we look back at the decade, the development of the Organization for Black Struggle parallels the Black Liberation Movement. There have been many twists and turns, valleys and mountains. Through it all, OBS has been the voice of the masses of people whose lives have been made miserable by the system of monopoly capitalism. Their valiant resistance continues to inspire and spawn movements of freedom and democracy around the world. OBS was built upon the legacy of dignity and determination passed on to us our proud and courageous African foreparents. We dedicate this booklet to their sacrifices.

What follows here are the first ten years of the Organization for Black Struggle, compressed into a few pages. The many issues, protests and triumphs, as well as the individuals who participated, are too numerous to mention. Of course, there were also setbacks and defeats that made us stronger.

However, our members and supporters felt that it was important to make an effort to tell the story of an unique organization who made a difference in the lives of many. OBS **has** made an impact in the struggle for political power, economic justice and cultural identity here in St. Louis.

The full story is yet to be told. We'll leave that to the People's Historians and do what we do best--
ORGANIZE! ORGANIZE! ORGANIZE!

LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

Brenda Bills
Richard Dockett
Kalimu Endesha
Luvenia Johnson
Tumaini Meta
Harold Pierrie

Al Lumpkins, Chair Jamala Rogers, Co-Chair





Above-Infrared Rockers has been a valuable asset to OBS and the St. Louis community.
Left-Black seeds come of age: Rites of Passage Ceremony for OBS youth.
Right-Informational picket at Fox Theater for Paul Simon's violation of the U.N. cultural boycott.





The founding of the Organization for Black Struggle was not a haphazard, spontaneous event. OBS was a direct result of the vacuum left in the Black Liberation Movement with the destruction of the now infamous F.B.I. COINTELPRO. The genuine leaders of the 60's were bought off, railroaded to jail, forced into exile or assassinated. What was perceived by many as a lull period was in fact an attempt to rethink, regroup and rebuild.

Activists who had acquired a wealth of experience from the 60's and 70's, joined with other concerned brothers and sisters to discuss the lack of leadership in the St. Louis African American community. Most had deep roots in community, students, and labor struggles. In fact, the core of this body had been involved in just about every major issue impacting Black folks in the 70's from organizing the local support committee for Atlanta's Missing and Murdered Children to the struggle to keep Homer G. Phillips Hospital open.

The group that came together in January, 1980 shared a vision. To organize a frustrated, powerless people into a fighting unit. To empower the community to change our conditions, our lives, and ultimately, our future. To restore dignity and hope to a nation of people whose total reality has been shaped by our enemies.

At that meeting, a commitment was made to build a broad based grassroots organization that would address the burning issues in the Black community. It was clear that the crux of these issues would be racism, sexism and classism. We developed a creed that emphatically stated



McKinley students protest the closing of their school.

we would be on the front line of the battles against <u>all</u> forms of oppression and exploitation. The name we gave ourselves made it crystal clear that we were about the business of Black folks. We understood the situation called for bold, uncompromising and creative leadership. We accepted that challenge.

Those who came together were bound by a common thread. Despite the pressures of jobs (or joblessness), family and other personal problems, we all wanted to devote some of our time and energies to improving the quality of life in our community. Men and especially women, would have to be trained and educated to take charge of their lives. An act of self-determination!

By coming together as a Black united front, Black people could maximize our resources for more consistent victories. Brothers and sisters across the country were reaching a similar consciousness about the same time. National organizing meetings led to the founding of the National Black United Front in Brooklyn, NY in June (1980). OBS members attended and were instrumental in the building of the local chapter of NBUF.

POLICE REPRESSION

The area that OBS is most known for is fighting police abuse in the forms of harassment, assault and murder. We were fortunate to have members previously involved in organizing against police brutality. They were active in People Fighting Repression, the Stop Killer Cops national campaign, etc., and brought skills and experiences beneficial to the new organization.

One of the first cases OBS was confronted with was the police shooting of Mary Frances Beasley, a Black woman from Kinloch, MO. She was shot six times by a white killer-cop from Berkeley, MO.(1979) Miraculously she survived, but Beasley was left permanently disabled from the vicious attack. OBS organized the entire Kinloch community through door-to-door petitioning, demonstrations, fundraisers, etc. Justice was not swift, but perseverance paid off. The white cop, Ken Hackmeyer, was fired. After a long legal battle, Beasley received financial compensation (though not enough!) when her civil suit was settled.

That small victory sent a reverberating message to other communities outside St. Louis, who were increasing their Black population, much to the fear of whites. Lack of decent housing and education had forced Blacks to move to St. Louis County, where they were met with hostility and violence. Police billy clubs and bullets were extensions of those feelings.

The Beasley case was an empowering experience for all involved because it re-enforced that only struggle makes change and that those who dared to confront the powers-that-be could organize to win.

The rest of the decade saw little regard for Black life by the police, both city and county--be it male or female, adult or child. From 20 year old Marilyn Banks ('83) to 17 year old Angela Robinson ('87) to 36 year old Nathaniel Branch ('88)--all lost their lives to white trigger-happy cops. Over the years, OBS has investigated hundreds of citizen complaints by victims or their families. We have mobilized for numerous protests at police stations to demand an end to the rampant police violence.

In most cases, the victim was Black and the officer, white. However, the killing of 24 year old Keith Turner by Officer Roy White, was an exception. The brutal and unprovoked shooting occurred as Turner sat in a parked car with others. Both Turner and White are African American. OBS organized an outraged community into action against the senseless murder, which led to White's being fired.

OBS felt it was necessary to give direction to the spontaneous outbursts by the community to police repression. We also knew that education was important, especially in exposing the historically racist and savage nature of the police and their role in maintaining control through intimidation and violence.

A brochure was developed to outline the steps to take when victimized by police. We gave workshops, talked about the issue on radio and television programs and used whatever means we had to prepare people to lead themselves.

OBS has been just as vocal in exposing the racism within the police department, agitating for the end to discriminatory practices and policies. Groups such as the NAACP and OBS helped to set the stage for the hiring and promoting of more Black officers. Sad to say, the demand for an African American Chief of Police remained unrealized at the end of 1990.

OBS provided legal advice and moral support to families of police abuse victims once it was determined what they wanted to do and how far they were willing to go. OBS has been indirectly responsible for over $1 million dollars in settlements to victims or their families. (The children of Marilyn Banks received an unprecedented $250,000). Along the way, we cultivated strong relationships with progressives in the legal field and other groups concerned with justice. These struggles helped to raise the community's political consciousness and level of organization.

Berkeley, MO police department was target of protest and campaign against their continued police brutality.



The U.S. criminal justice system, which includes the police, the courts and the prisons, has been extremely destructive to Black family life. We could predict that the courts and the school system would be the two most negative influences(yet legal) that Black youth would experience.

End of the decade studies confirmed that 1 of 4 Black males were in prison or under some form of penal supervision.

Further, statistics showed a nearly 50% drop-out rate for the predominantly African American St. Louis school district. A dummy could figure out that our schools have become feeders for the jails and prisons. The last ten years has seen the prison population doubled in this country, with Blacks confined in disproportionate numbers.

During the late '70s, some of us were part of several coalitions for prison reform, including the Missouri Nine Committee. This committee was made up of families and friends of nine inmates who had been charged with the murder of a guard at Missouri State Penitentiary. In spite of the many obstacles by then Warden, Donald Wyrick, the group claimed a significant victory by getting two of the nine acquitted. The lessons and contacts from this battle set the tone for our criminal justice and prison support work.

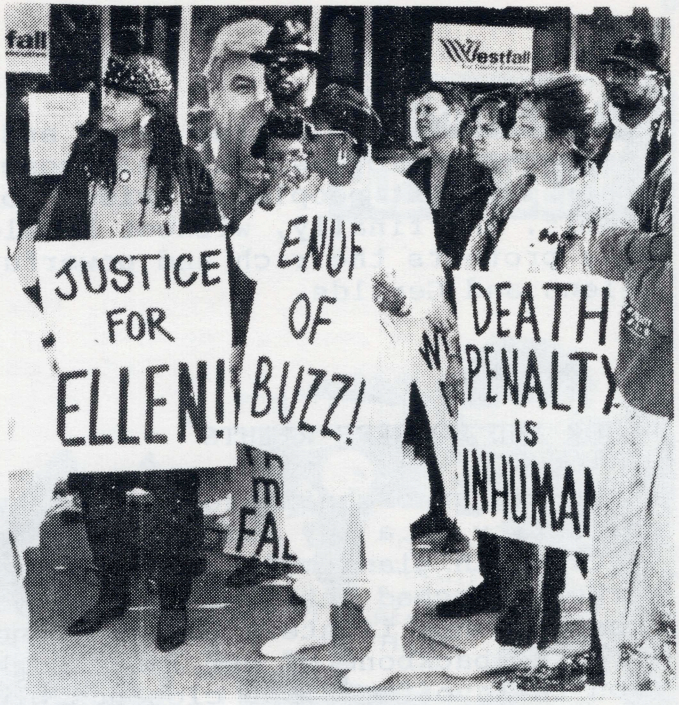
Over the years, our prison network has expanded to include most of Missouri's hell-holes, known as correctional facilities. The network also includes correspondence with prisoners in Kansas, Michigan, New York, Illinois and Mississippi. A central part of prison support work is helping inmates and their families understand the system better in order to know what their rights are. Only then, can they squeeze out any semblance of justice from a monstrous penal system whose only interest is more profit.

Currently in Missouri, it costs more to house a prisoner than it does to educate a child. Priorities must be changed. Prisons must take a humane approach to rehabilitation. The U.S. now tops the apartheid regime of South African in its rates of incarceration and death sentences.

We published "Behind These Walls", an outlet for expression of political views or exposing of inhumane conditions by those imprisoned. "BTW" is then sent out to our mailing list of prisoners and groups concerned with prison reform. We sponsored periodic visits to Missouri State Penitentiary in order talk with brothers and let them know they are not forgotten, hear their concerns and monitor prison conditions.

Two cases that truly illuminate the travesties of this criminal system are those of Gerald Garrett and Ellen Reasonover, both in Missouri prisons on trumped up charges.

Gerald Garrett's torturous journey through the system began in the late 70's when he was just a teen. Perhaps as revenge for his family moving into an all-white neighborhood, Garrett soon found himself facing two murder charges stemming from the death of two elderly white women in the neighborhood. After years of legal maneuvering, Garrett's conviction was overturned, but only after he had been robbed of his youth.



Demonstration by Reasonover supporters outside Buzz Westfall's campaign office. He was Prosecuting Attorney in Ellen's trial. (1990)

Gerald Garrett's nightmare didn't end here. After his release in 1988, he got a job and began putting his life back together. In less than a year, police authorities smacked Gerald with two more phony charges that has thrown him behind bars for another seven years.

Ellen Reasonover's situation started off differently, but ended the same as Garrett's. In '83, she stepped forward to assist a police investigation into the death of a white gas station attendant, James Buckley. Buckley, a drug dealer, was found bludgeoned and shot to death at a station where Ellen had noticed a suspicious situation.

With no real evidence except the testimony of two paid informants, police charged Ellen with the murder, and threw in a robbery of another gas station. Ellen's case has received broad mass support and national publicity. OBS, along with other supportive organizations, have waged a relentless battle to expose this injustice and rally the community to this young mother's defense. Ellen has exhausted all legal appeals at this point, but clearly the struggle is not over.

The community drew many valuable lessons from the Garrett and Reasonover cases because both are "classic" railroadings. The most important lesson learned was that

the system had unlimited power and resources to conspire against its victims. We could conclude that there were other innocent people in prison for crimes they didn't commit. And finally, without knowledge about how the system only protects the rich and powerful, we are all potential Ellens and Geralds.

LABOR AND WORKERS RIGHTS

OBS is an organization for the working class, so worker solidarity is a key component. In a ten year discrimination battle with giant multi-national, General Motors, Black workers reached into the community for support. Some of these staunch fighters became founding members of OBS and were the backbone of our labor work. They led the opposition to layoffs, plant closings plus racist and sexist discrimination of workers.

They organized a caucus to force the United Auto Workers to be more accountable to its membership. The Concerned Auto Workers fought for fair wages, safe working conditions and job security.

OBS joined the Jobs Campaign of 1983. We helped to form the Missouri Black Labor Council as an umbrella for labor activists. We have worked with groups, such as the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists and Black Workers for Justice, to give African American workers a greater voice. Whenever and wherever there was resistance, we were there. This was evident, such as when Black women rose up against the slave-like conditions at Morgan Linen Laundry (1984).

We also received calls for assistance from employees who chose dignity over being "dogged" in the workplace. Sometimes these cases ended up in courts as workers sought redress to their problems. No opportunity was missed to coalesce with others for the unification of workers everywhere.

The last decade saw a dramatic increase in racist violence because of the national tone and policy set by the Reagan Administration. Ronald Reagan declared "open season" on people of color while in office. Once again, it became acceptable to be a racist.

Even the Klu Klux Klan flourished. And so, the national March Against the Klan saw us take to the streets with hundreds from across the country in Wrightsville, GA. We went on to work on pulling together a local chapter of the Anti-Klan Network.

We have been on record for opposing the racist climate and violence perpetrated at the annual Veiled Prophet Fair on the Mississippi Riverfront that commemorates July 4th. In 1982, tensions peaked when a 17 year old Black youth was forced to shoot and kill two white men who were part of an attacking mob. When OBS threatened protest actions at the Fair to protect the right to self-defense, murder charges were quickly dropped against the youth.

OBS investigated other acts of racist violence. Whether it was a white teacher slapping a 7 year old child in the Jennings school district ('87) or the burning of Rocky Fork AME Church in Godfrey, IL ('88), we defended the right of African Americans to live, work and worship wherever they chose.



1980 March Against the Klan in Wrightsville, GA.

ELECTORAL POLITICS

The fight for political empowerment is a never ending one for a powerless people. One aspect of that fight is participation in the electoral process. Our foreparents intended for us to use the right to vote, which they had won at the expense of much blood and sweat. The ballot is only one road to political power. Due to disgust in government and general apathy, the full potential of the vote has not been realized and so, its real impact is seldom felt.

OBS sees electoral politics as a means to an end, not the end itself. We have rallied the community behind progressive candidates and issues as a way to take responsibility for our destiny. There has been some decisive gains in getting legislation and candidates that truly represented our interests.

OBS provided leadership in getting the community to know the who's and why's in the various campaigns. We played an active role in many of these elections, including the first serious bid of an African American for Mayor (Freeman Bosley, Sr. in 1985) and for President of the United States (Rev. Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988). We played a pivotal role in Progressives United, a historic effort that brought progressive and grassroots forces in the city together to work for the candidacy of Bosley Sr. for Mayor.

Although Bosley's bid was unsuccessful, it laid the groundwork for loosening the grip of the racist incumbent, Vince "Shameful" Schoemehl. The campaign trained activists on the nuts and bolts of ward and citywide elections.

We're proud to have been a part of several winning campaigns for candidates and issues. We have committed ourselves to doing ongoing political education so that we have a more informed and sophisticated Black voter. We have little tolerance for white or Black elected officials who work with our enemies to keep us all down. All of us must unite to protect the democratic process.



Press conference announcing formation of Progressives United and its support for Bosley Sr. as mayoral candidate.

YOUTH & EDUCATION

Most dear to us has been our youth work. Without a real investment in our children, our future as a prepared and productive people is bleak. Our children continue to be miseducated in the public schools. In general, their health and welfare are low on this country's list of priorities. This must be changed.

OBS has been a part of the organized fight by students, parents and school staff against neighborhood school closings, such as McKinley and Soldan high schools (1982). We have worked in the city and the county for more representative school boards. As members of Concerned Citizens of University City, we brought in that city's first Black and female superintendent, Dr. Rosie Doughtery. We have supported slates in opposition to the take-over of the white citizens council, who have obstructed the progress of the St. Louis school board.

By the mid-80's, OBS began to put more energy and resources into developing its youth component. The Youth Council for Positive Development has grown in leaps and bounds, charting its own course to take on those issues that affect them. Programs such as the Empowerment Series and the Youth Cultural Theater are just two of the ways that we're nurturing our young people to be able to carry the torch that will be passed on to them. Networking with local and national youth groups provides an additional forum for sharing information and experiences.

This generation of youth faces tremendous difficulties and we must prepare them accordingly. Our love and support for our young must be unwavering and unconditional.

COALITION BUILDING

The coalitions that OBS has been involved with over the years are too numerous to list. We uphold the superiority of the collective over the individual. The Workfare concept was beat back as racist and unfair in 1982. The Tiffany Neighborhood's fight to save their homes from greedy redevelopers was victorious only after the community joined hands ('84). The united effort to defeat the 3/8¢ sales tax ('89) was probably the broadest and most diverse seen in this decade. The adage, "There's strength in numbers", works in real life.

OBS continued to link up the many issues to show there's a common enemy. We pointed out how imperialism destroys people of color across the globe. Our international work was mainly done through the National Black United Front and the League of Revolutionary Struggle, whose strength in this area was greater than ours. We upheld the right of self-determination for Palestinians and any other just liberation struggle. We actively took up the fight against apartheid and rejoiced with the world when Nelson Mandela was released from prison ('90).

We advanced into new frontiers where Black and poor people historically had little participation. Inroads were made into the Pro-Choice, Peace and Environment movements. We knew the poor stood to suffer more when the rights and laws within this issues were diminished or eliminated. We take an active stand on sexism and violence against women in this society.

CONCLUSION

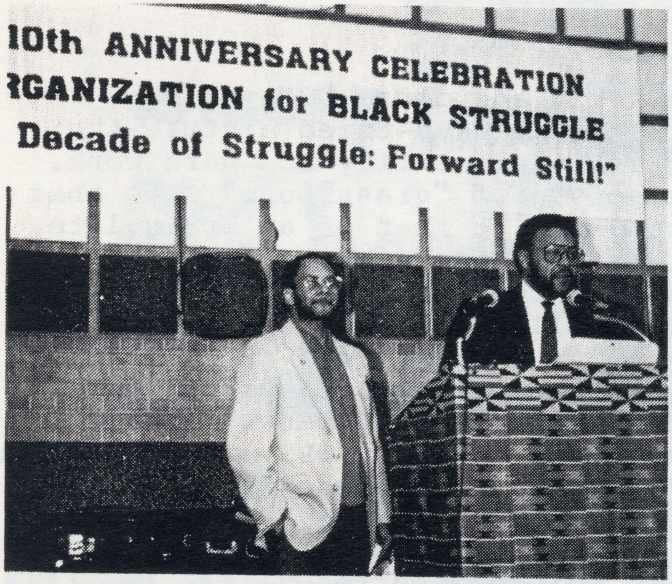
OBS has proven its viability and dedication to its principles. Over the years, we've fine-tuned a style that is characterized by integrity, reliability and hard work. It meant changing the stereotype of "grassroots" from that of a rag-tag, disorganized group to that of an articulate, professional fighting entity. Our rise in stature and influence has made it possible for the masses to feel their own power and walk a little taller.

Our methods of struggle have been as Malcolm X suggested, "by any means necessary". In most cases, these were highly visible and militant actions. OBS has no problem being the voice in the wilderness that echoed the sentiment and aspirations of a disenfranchised people.

Other times, it took a quieter, but equally effective, approach. A good example of this was when we sent a letter of protest to the Director of Emergency Health Services in Jefferson City ('82) whose office had been denying an ambulance permit to Central Medical Center, a small Black hospital. This was genocidal, and was put forward as such. A day after our letter was received, the license was issued. Dr. John Doggett, then President of CMC's Board of Directors, personally expressed his gratitude to OBS as the matter had been dragging on for months with no action.



1985 downtown march by the St. Louis April Mobilization Coalition.



Circuit Clerk, Freeman Bosley Jr. assists Rep. Charles "Quincy" Troupe in presenting OBS with a proclamation from the Missouri House of Representatives for A Decade of Struggle.

R. Top-OBS supproters welcome ANC's Themba Vilakazi at keynote speaker at 6th Anniversary Celebration.
R. Bottom-Aerial view of celebration which attracts many from all walks of life every year (1986).

Regardless of how and where OBS did it, our success rate gained the confidence of the community. We take that confidence very seriously, and believe our accountability to the people is unquestionable.

As 1990 comes to a close, the war in the Persian Gulf and the economic recession bring a great deal of uncertainty. We face the Twenty First Century with a keen insight into the difficult road ahead. Those of you who understand the intensity of that struggle must join hands with us and not give lip service to what is truly needed.

OBS will continue to tap into the collective resources, energy and wisdom of the African American community to meet the growing demands of our people. We re-commit ourselves to the liberation of African people and proudly carry the "Banner of Invincibility".

FORWARD STILL!





ORGANIZATION FOR BLACK STRUGGLE
1980 - 1990

REVOLUTIONARY APPRECIATION

To All Those Who

Gave Us Their

Labor, Love & Laughter--

We Still Need You!