
Meet the Afro-Latinx Activists Empowering Black Immigrants

27/02/2017



Attacks on immigrants in the United States are undoubtedly on the rise across the board, but the experiences of Black immigrants, who face particular forms of racism, are often erased from dominant narratives on migration.

Since U.S. President Donald Trump was elected last November, there have been over 1,000 reported hate crimes against immigrants across the country, the Southern Poverty Law Center reports. In 2015 alone, there were 5,850 reported hate crime incidents nationally, up 6.8 percent from 5,479 in 2014.

While anti-immigrant hate crimes were already heightening prior to Trump's election, his tirades against immigrants have only made the situation worse.

In Washington state, for example, Trump supporters spray-painted a swastika with a racist message referring to the President on a Mexican family's home in Spokane. The graffiti read "Can't stump the Trump, Mexicans."

"We're afraid they're going to do something," Leticia Rosas told the *Spokesman-Review*. Rosas lives in the house with her husband and their three children.

And in Michigan, a Trump supporter called a Grand Rapids church with a large Latino population and left a racist voicemail.

"I hope Trump gets ya," the suspect said. "Trump's gonna get your asses out of here and throw you over the wall. You dirty rotten scumbags."

These hate crimes are just a sample of the oppression that most immigrants, especially those who are undocumented, experience on a daily basis.

But for many Black immigrants, there's an added form of oppression as a result of the anti-Black racism they face.

Black immigrants are much more likely than nationals from other regions to be deported due to a criminal conviction, the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, BAJI, reports. Black immigrants also have the highest unemployment rates amongst all immigrant groups.

It doesn't stop there.

Black immigrants are also least likely to receive Temporary Protected Status, TPS, preventing them from being deported back to often war-torn or environmentally-damaged countries.

It's no surprise that this particular demographic is among the most persecuted, given the long history of racism against Black communities in the United States. But little known to many is that Black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean are one of the fastest-growing immigrant groups in the country.

The immigrant rights movement tends to be dominated by non-Black Spanish-speaking Latinos. But as the population of Black immigrants in the U.S. continues to increase, a growing number of Afro-Latinx organizers are uniting to serve this disproportionately attacked immigrant group.

teleSUR spoke to three Afro-Latinx activists to discuss how they are organizing to empower Black immigrants in their communities and what life for Black immigrants looks like.

Rocio Silverio: Fighting anti-Blackness

Silverio is national coordinator for the Black Immigration Network, a project of BAJI that works for policy and cultural shifts promoting a racial justice and migrant rights agenda. Silverio, based in New York City, is of Dominican heritage and identifies as Black.

For Silverio, the struggle to empower Black immigrants is connected with the struggle against anti-Blackness.

"In our immigrant communities, anti-Blackness and colorism takes shape in different ways," she said.

"For those in our communities who practice anti-Blackness, it won't save or spare them from the injustices of white supremacy."

Silverio's organization is involved in campaigns that bring visibility to Black immigrants through advocacy, organizing and coalition building. BAJI is active in assisting Black immigrants facing deportations with legal resources. The organization also works alongside families from African, Latin American and Caribbean countries to challenge immigration policies that separate children from their parents.

While Silverio believes Trump's administration is presenting more problems for Black immigrants, she says that previous administrations have been complicit in their oppression.

"The groundwork was laid out with the Clinton and Obama administrations," she said. "It started with the last comprehensive reform of immigration laws in 1996, which increased deportations and applied them retroactively."

Silverio has also been involved in campaigns to defend Haitian immigrants living in the Dominican Republic facing persecution. In 2013, when the Dominican government issued a ruling denationalizing an estimated 250,000 Haitians living in the country, she and others immediately hit the streets in protest.

Since then, she's been active in challenging racism within community spaces in solidarity with Black immigrants.

"As many of us in the African diaspora, we understand the plight of being marginalized under structural racism," Silverio said.

"It is our responsibility to work with people from other Black immigrant groups fighting for their lives."

Fatima Murrieta: "Blackify-ing" immigrant rights

???????Murrieta is co-founder of the UndocuBlack Network, a new organization whose mission is to "Blackify" the

undocumented immigrant narrative in the U.S. and facilitate access to resources for the Black undocumented community. Murrieta, based in Los Angeles, was born in Colombia and identifies as Afro-Latinx.

Murrieta believes that the existing immigrant rights structure has not properly welcomed Black immigrants into accessing resources, thus inspiring her to take action.

"Many immigration groups think they should only focus on the 'majority,' who are oftentimes non-Black. That has been a huge barrier in integrating Afro-Latinx and Black immigrants," she said.

"We need to have a movement that actively engages impacted people, and that includes Black immigrants. We need to build trust in their communities."

UndocuBlack Network was founded in Miami, Florida, in January 2016 as a gathering of over 65 Black undocumented persons in the area. Since then, the organization has been involved in planning similar assemblies across the country, as well as developing mental health initiatives, resource guides and telephone-based support groups.

Murrieta, who spearheads UndocuBlack Network's Los Angeles branch, has organized workshops for Black immigrants interested in applying for citizenship. While providing legal resources is an important part of empowering their community, she believes addressing their health issues is just as important.

"There is a huge physical and mental hardship that Black immigrants experience in this country," she said.

"They live under constant stress that isn't healthy. This stress forces them to get things like high blood pressure, which they are disproportionately affected by."

Murrieta is currently partnering with high schools and colleges in the South Los Angeles area to host "Know Your Rights" trainings, legal fairs and health clinics catered toward Black immigrant youth.

Pablo Blanco: Welcoming the Garifuna Diaspora

Blanco is the founder of Garifuna Nation, a new organization that promotes the culture, identity and economic well-being of the Garifuna diaspora. Blanco, based in New York City, is of Honduran heritage and identifies as Garifuna, an Afro-descendent community that has lived for centuries on the Caribbean coast of Central America, especially Honduras.

For Blanco, who works closely with newly-arrived Garifuna immigrants fleeing violence and poverty in Honduras, immigration resources designed specifically for his community are hard to come by.

"We don't have a strong support system for all this like other communities do," he said.

"Since we come from rural communities in Honduras, we're not used to dealing with other people on a personal basis. There's sometimes a trust issue. We would rather deal with our own people in regards to something like this, especially because of language."

Because of this, Blanco is working with other grassroots organizations to create legal clinics for Garifuna people who prefer to speak their native language when seeking immigration help. He is also working alongside elders of his community to create economic development plans for newly-arrived Garifuna immigrants.

He is also actively organizes cultural events across New York City that promote Garifuna history, culture, dance and tradition. For Blanco, it's a way to teach and build relations with other immigrant groups, which he believes are necessary tasks.

"All of us have to work with each other because we are all fighting for the same dreams," Blanco said.

"With other Black immigrant communities from Latin America, we can communicate in Spanish. We also have shared experiences travelling to the U.S. that unite us. That's a starting point."

Blanco takes inspiration from his grandfather, who helped over 38 Garifuna relatives from Honduras move to their

neighborhood in The Bronx. Today, the area has become home to thousands of newly-arrived Garifuna immigrants from Honduras seeking refuge.
