

School Brawls Expose Black-Latino Tension

Written by Robert ID1277

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The sight of over 100 black and Latino students brawling at a major Los Angeles high school recently exposed the enduring myth of Black-Brown solidarity. In truth, tensions between Latino and black students have always lurked dangerously close to the surface, fueled by the changing ethnic realities in Los Angeles, and America, in the past decade.

Two racially motivated brawls at Jefferson High School in April left several students wounded and a campus at least temporarily split by race. It was only the latest in a series of brawls that have torn area schools over the past few years. The school's principal told the Los Angeles Times that racial tensions were "coming out of the community, and into the school."

Following the civil rights era, the popular fiction was that, since blacks and Latinos are "people of color" with a similar history of racial discrimination and poverty, their struggle was the same. During the 1960s, some blacks and Latinos did form organizations and raise issues that appeared to mirror each other. There was the Black Panther Party and the La Raza Unida Party, and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the Mexican-American Legal and Education Defense Fund, for example. The Poor Peoples March in Washington, D.C., in 1968 was the highpoint of ethnic co-operation then.

But with the death of Martin Luther King Jr., the collapse of the civil rights movement and the self-destruct of the black power movement, black leaders who were willing to extend their vision of change to other ethnics were gone. The leadership vacuum marked the start of the retreat to race isolation.

The last decade has presented a new reality. Through massive immigration and higher birth rates, Latinos have displaced blacks as the largest non-white minority in America. They demand that political and social issues no longer be framed solely in black and white.

The agendas of African-Americans and Latinos diverge particularly on these issues: Immigration, political representation, jobs and bilingual education.

Immigration: Many Latino immigrants have been displaced from the land in their native countries. They have few job prospects there and little education. Survival, not assimilation, is

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the priority of these "economic refugees." They fiercely guard their customs, religion and language, often living in tight-knit barrios to better preserve family ties and language. They send money home to Mexico or El Salvador and return often to visit relatives and friends.

Jobs: Many Latinos work at low pay jobs that offer no health, union or retirement benefits, but may represent a marked improvement from the life they left. Many employers take advantage of their economic plight and hire them to work the dirtiest and most hazardous jobs in plants, factories and farms. Previously unskilled or semi-skilled white and black workers once held these jobs.

As African-American communities reel from a decade of job, education and social service cuts, immigrant labor competition could further marginalize the black poor by raising joblessness, decreasing job benefits and exacerbating the crime and drug crisis.

Bi-lingual education: Cash-strapped inner-city school districts cannot stem the astronomical dropout and illiteracy rates among black students without adequate funds, materials and trained staff. Many African-Americans insist that bi-lingual programs drain school districts of those badly needed resources.

Latinos counter that bi-lingual education is crucial to improving reading and math proficiency skills for their Spanish-speaking children. More money, they say, should be spent on the educational needs of all children. But when the money is tight, the problem quickly is reduced to ethnic squabbling over the scarce dollars.

Political representation: The ethnic make-up of many neighborhoods has changed from black and white to brown. From the local to the national level, Latino leaders now demand their fair share of political appointments and positions. This could erode the newfound political gains and power blacks have won through decades of struggle. Many African-American leaders argue that the numbers that count most are the voting numbers, and blacks vote in proportionally greater numbers than Latinos. To them, power sharing is out of the question.

Government cutbacks in job and social programs have wreaked havoc on the black and Latino poor. Both have a vital interest in the fight for low-cost housing, quality education, better health care, police protection and efficient city services.

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With blacks and browns increasingly living together in many residential neighborhoods, physical separation has broken down. In some neighborhoods, community groups have tenuously bridged the culture and language gap and have joined forces to protest crime and school and housing deterioration. National organizations such as the National Council of La Raza and the NAACP can keep the lines of communication open through multi-issue workshops, conferences and seminars.

A couple of days after the Jefferson High clash, several hundred black and Latino parents and students held an anti-violence forum at the school. Speaker after speaker denounced the fighting and pledged to work for peace. The hard truth, though, is that blacks and Latinos are undergoing a painful period of adjustment. They will find the struggle for power and recognition to be long and difficult. The parents and students who pledged to work for peace made an important start.

*This article is by Earl Ofari Hutchinson a contributing writer for the Pacific News Service. Earl Ofari Hutchinson is a political analyst and social issues commentator and the author of "The Crisis in Black and Black" (Middle Passage Press).