

UHURU!

FREEDOM! SPECIAL ISSUE!

FOR MALCOLM

You taught us to stand
when lying down was easy
we've fallen again.

--Jake Wideman

FROM THE SEPTEMBER 29th MOVEMENT:

This year marks the toughest test for the righteous. Those who wish to promote racism, xenophobia and classism think The September 29th Movement has lost steam. They are far from correct.

In this issue, as well as the following two issues of *UHURU!*, you, the people, will receive knowledge and insight to continue the struggle. The key word is *struggle*. Remember that a movement does not succeed in one day, but one day the Movement will succeed. Only the persistence of the righteous can defeat the arrogance of the wicked. After reading *White Woman's Burden* in this issue, the position paper of The September 29th Movement in the next issue, and actual statistics of how poorly this institution has treated minorities and women in the third issue, it will be clear which side is which.

Only through knowledge can you gain the wisdom needed to manifest total understanding. Catt Hall *will* be renamed. We cannot afford to pay homage to a person who celebrated white supremacy. Understand that white supremacy at the time of Catt meant:

- the lynching of Black males;
- the raping of Black women;
- the extermination of Native Americans and Native Mexicans;
- the oppression and hatred of immigrants.

Remember what lynching was. It included the hanging of, the castration of, and the burning of Black males. This is the type of wicked devilishness that Catt condoned and promised to strengthen. Remember this image as you read Meron Wondwosen's scholarly paper, *White Woman's Burden: Carrie Chapman Catt and Racism Within the Suffrage Movement*.

Knowledge. Wisdom. Understanding.

by Gabriel Clausen

"There are many ways to look
without seeing, and for
those caught in the web of
oppression,
not being seen is so
familiar that
it feels ordinary."

---Lewis R. Gordon

WHITE WOMAN'S BURDEN: CARRIE CHAPMAN CATT AND RACISM WITHIN THE SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT

For The September 29th Movement
by
Meron Wondwosen

Introduction

Today many debates arise over the existence of racism within the woman suffrage movement. Some argue that the suffragists were not racists. They felt betrayed by their exclusion from the voting populace and later used racist arguments only to further their cause. These women might not have been racist in their beliefs but they used the prevalent hatred of certain groups to their advantage. Therefore they were politically racist. Among one of the

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forgotten contributors to the woman suffrage movement is a Wisconsin native whose name is rarely mentioned with the likes of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Carrie Chapman Catt was a suffragist whose actions caused others to question her methods. Her speeches and writings suggest and support the claim that she used political tactics that contributed to continued oppression and also hindered the progress of Blacks, Native Americans, Latino/as and immigrants in North America.

This paper will discuss the circumstances leading up to Catt's resentment of Blacks and other non-majority groups and her use of offensive tactics to secure the vote for women. In doing so, some background information on the woman suffrage movement and the different methods used to achieve the vote will be discussed. This paper will also focus on the use of racist, classist, and xenophobic arguments by Carrie Chapman Catt and will provide a critique of Catt's methods and dispel justification for the support or excuse of those methods today.

The first section, *Ties with The Abolitionist Movement*, will focus on the relationship between the abolitionist movement and the woman suffrage movement. This section will also highlight the resentment of the suffragists at the introduction of the word "male" into the constitution. The second section, *The Southern Question*, will examine the difficulties suffragists faced while attempting to acquire southern support, as well as the reasons behind the opposition of most southerners to the enfranchisement of women. The third section, *The Methods to Their Madness*, will consist of two parts. The first part will discuss the different methods used by the suffragists to acquire the vote before their appeal to the South. The second part will focus on the methods used to disenfranchise Blacks and others by white suffragists while courting the South. The fourth section, *Carrie Chapman Catt*, will provide a brief description of Catt's political participation and outline her strategic use of racism, classism and xenophobia to gain support for the 19th Amendment. The fifth section, *Critique of Catt's Methods*, will challenge the hypothesis that her methods were justified and provide reasons for the unacceptability of those methods today.

This issue is important: despite the fact that *all* women were oppressed by the same system which denied non-majority groups their rights, in their struggle for enfranchisement many white women within the movement chose not to

join with people of color in their struggle. Instead, they used the fear and ignorance of "others" and directed it towards people of color to further their cause. To excuse their strategies and their methods today as being "politically expedient" condones the use of racist, xenophobic and classist rhetoric while campaigning for any cause.

Ties with The Abolitionist Movement

The woman suffrage movement had a strong relationship with the abolitionist movement from its origins. Women and men, both Black and white, had actively opposed slavery and joined the abolitionist movement. The abolitionist movement and the woman rights movement sought universal human rights and suffrage.¹ During this time, there was a strong sense of solidarity between those involved because the elimination of slavery was seen as a cause that would be supported by all involved, regardless of sex or race. The abolitionist movement was rewarded with the passage of the 13th Amendment which outlawed slavery. Having accomplished that goal, many abolitionists joined the fight to enfranchise Black men and all women. At the start of the suffrage movement, the fight was indeed for universal suffrage. However, the proposed 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution sought only to enfranchise Black men, leaving women of all races out of the loop. The rise of the woman suffrage movement escalated after the passage of the 15th Amendment which enfranchised Black men exclusively.

The argument over the ratification of the 15th Amendment split the suffrage movement into two camps in 1869.² Some white women vehemently opposed the 15th Amendment and felt betrayed. They had fought for the liberation of Black men from the shackles of slavery and yet they themselves were now being denied participation in the political process. In 1869, they formed the National Woman's Suffrage Association (NWSA) which was headed by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady.³ Other white women continued to fight for suffrage while supporting the enfranchisement of Black men. They formed the American woman Suffrage Association (AWSA).⁴ It was headed by Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell. After twenty years of separate campaigning, the two organizations decided to merge, since they sought the same ends. In 1890, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was formed. NAWSA petitioned state governments and the

federal government to include women in the voting process.⁵

The Methods to Their Madness Before the South

Before the split between the abolitionist movement and the woman suffrage movement, there were no qualifications to vote. Even though many thought that education was important, Anthony felt it would hinder Blacks and so the issue was dropped. Suffragists had crusaded for the right to vote in several ways. At the start of the struggle, all Blacks, all Native Americans and white women could not vote. Therefore the Dawes Act, which granted Native Americans citizenship and enfranchisement, was proposed. For Blacks and white women, an unsuccessful amendment to enfranchise them was also proposed. After Black men attained the vote, suffragists attempted to challenge their disenfranchised state through the Constitution. In 1871, women claimed they were entitled to vote because they were citizens but the Supreme Court ruled that citizenship did not automatically guarantee the enfranchisement of women.⁶ The question of their enfranchisement was left to the states. The suffragists then attempted to enfranchise women through state-by-state ratification of the Amendment proposed by Anthony.

The Southern Question

The suffragists had to overcome the opposition of southerners to woman suffrage. The votes of as many Congressmen as possible were essential while attempting to ratify the amendment using the state-by-state approach.⁷ Many southerners were opposed to woman suffrage for several reasons. First, they resented the involvement of women and, indeed, many suffragists in the abolitionist movement. Second, they feared the enfranchisement of women would give Black women the vote; although they used sheer force and brutality to disenfranchise Black men, they were somewhat reluctant to do the same with Black women.⁸ Third, they feared the enfranchisement of Black women would interfere with white supremacy and therefore disturb Anglo-Saxon dominance in the South.

Fully aware of this obstacle that stood in their path, many suffragists used racist speeches and writings to get the conservative white male vote. While this move was seen as "politically sly" by many, it shows how people of color were (and are) seen as politically

expedient. To use an already demoralized group of people in a manner that suggests that they were not deserving of the vote was dehumanizing. Without a doubt, suffragists gained their right to vote at the expense of others.

The Methods to their Madness: To Win the South

Aside from pushing the woman suffrage agenda from state to state, women used several other strategies to assure passage of the amendment. To appease southern racists and support classist views they also held, suffragists added restrictions to voting. For instance, suffragists advocated the use of literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and poll taxes, as well as individual taxes to exclude most Blacks, immigrants, Native Americans and Latino/as from the ballot. Since most men from those groups were already disenfranchised through the use of these methods, suffragists argued that the continued use of those restrictions would lower the impact of the vote of women of color.⁹

These restrictions were often imposed by state legislatures and went unchallenged by the federal government. Many Blacks had to read as well as interpret the state constitution.¹⁰ This was not required of whites. Other barriers, such as the grandfather clause, stipulated that the citizen's grandfather must have been enfranchised during his lifetime in order to vote. This automatically reduced the number of non-majority groups able to vote.

Carrie Chapman Catt

Although she might not be a household suffragist name, Catt is credited with the "winning strategy" that finally enfranchised primarily white women with the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. She was one of the leading women in the fight for the vote. Catt was raised in Iowa and graduated at the top of her class from Iowa State College in 1880. While at Iowa State, Catt fought for the right of women to participate in military drills, debates and orations.¹¹ She was a writer and an editor. She founded the Iowa Suffrage Association and the League of Women Voters. In 1900, Catt became president of NAWSA and remained in that office until 1904. She returned to the presidency in 1915 and remained until the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920. She worked for the creation of the League of Nations as well as the United Nations.

While her dedication to the suffrage movement was unwavering, her view of "others" - Blacks, Native Americans, Latino/as and immigrants - as being inferior to Anglo-Saxons tarnishes her reputation. Some of Catt's views, speeches and actions will be classified and discussed in three categories: racism, nativism and classism. The first section, Racism, will focus on her dislike and distrust of African-Americans, Native Americans and Latino/as. The second section, Nativism, highlights her belief that home rule was most desired and therefore advocated, leaving new immigrants out of the political process. The last and third section, Classism, will discuss her opinion of the lower class and her belief that the poor and the uneducated should not be the political equals of educated middle-class white women. She believed that these groups of people did not deserve to have the vote that was denied to her.

Racism: Attack on African-Americans

Although the proposed amendment was supposed to benefit all women, some of Catt's tactics were aimed at the disenfranchisement Blacks. At this point in her crusade for woman suffrage, she felt that they threatened her cause. First, she felt they were unworthy of the vote and that it was forced upon them. She wrote: "[H]ad not the Republican Party enfranchised the Negro by whip and bayonet, it would have been easier for women to gain their enfranchisement without party endorsements."¹² She felt that "the Negro was making little demand for the vote ... The woman was making an unprecedented one."¹³ Second, she felt that many African-Americans were opposed to woman suffrage. Catt did not take into account that when she condoned white supremacy, she condoned racism and hatred, which contributed, and still contributes, to the death of many Blacks. Therefore, if some Blacks seemed opposed to the enfranchisement of a group (NAWSA) which pledged to support the status quo in the south, their apprehension should be partly seen as a survival tactic. Catt's belief about the opposition of all Blacks to woman suffrage is a generalization, since Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Mary Church Terrell and other Blacks, while opposed to her hateful rhetoric, fully supported woman suffrage.

Third, Catt thought that Blacks were ignorant and easily prone to corruption. She claimed the "women of American birth will always resent the fact that American men chose to enfranchise Negroes fresh from slavery" over women such as herself.¹⁴ Her claim to the ballot

was based on never being a slave which, in her mind, made her more suited to govern. She also believed that the Black vote was purchasable and easily manipulated. Because of this erroneous belief, she agreed with the North for not protesting or questioning the disenfranchisement of African-Americans, even by unconstitutional means.¹⁵

Catt and other suffragists had many opportunities to show their support of non-majority groups. In 1903, when a newspaper article questioned whether the NAWSA advocated "social equality," Catt and other members wrote that they had no official view on race and that the race issue was irrelevant to their quest.¹⁶ Their response assured the public that woman suffrage had nothing to do with the "Negro Question." The statement declared the stance of NAWSA as being in favor of state's rights. According to Roselyn Terborg-Penn, an expert scholar on Black women in the suffrage movement, such a declaration was "tantamount to an endorsement of white supremacy."¹⁷

In yet another instance, an organization for Black women's rights sought cooperative membership in NAWSA in 1919. Catt pleaded with the organization to postpone its membership until after the amendment passed.¹⁸ Catt's inability to support her sisters of color in the face of white supremacy speaks to her lack of concern for the enfranchisement of all women.

With the growth of opposition from white southern Congressmen, Catt set out to assure them that the balance of power in the South would remain intact. She went further by stating that "white supremacy will be strengthened, not weakened, by woman suffrage."¹⁹ Catt believed that the enfranchisement of women would not only assure the status quo but also benefit the South. Realizing the fear Southerners had concerning the enfranchisement of Black women, Catt remarked that the number of white women in the South exceeded that of Black women.²⁰ In fact, it exceeded that of the Black population. Therefore, they were able to offset the Black vote. She also said that in states where Black women outnumber white women, the means used to disenfranchise Black men (literacy test, poll and property tax, and the grandfather clause) would apply to women.²¹ She urged the South to push for woman suffrage if it wanted white supremacy. She said that "woman suffrage would so vastly increase the white vote ... it would guarantee white supremacy if it otherwise stood in danger of overthrow."²²

Racism: Attack on Latino/as and Native Americans

Catt's statements concerning Latino/as and Native Americans were just as malicious as her statements about Blacks. Because Latino/as were of a lower civilization, she said, their opposition to woman suffrage would be "more bitter and vindictive."²³ Catt was appalled at the respect and honor given to Native Americans at a convention. She referred to them as uncivilized barbarians and scalping warriors.²⁴ Just as with Blacks, she believed they were enfranchised too quickly. That Native Americans deserved the vote before any other groups seems to have escaped her. She wrote, "[A]s they [Native Americans] were reclaimed from primitive habits and established in civilized customs, they too were enfranchised."²⁵ She was upset because she felt they would be the "political rulers" of white women. She used the traditional ghost dance of some Sioux natives to say they are incapable of rational thought.²⁶

In fact, Catt insisted on referring to Native Americans as savages. During a speech in 1916, Catt spoke of an uprising by Sioux Indians at a South Dakota reservation and said that "these Indians instituted one of the cruelest and most savage massacres in our history."²⁷ At this point, Catt does not mention the annihilation of Native American tribes by whites. She added that "they [Native Americans] committed atrocities upon women so indescribably indecent that they were never recorded in ordinary history."²⁸ Catt offers no proof to support her statement. She continued her assault on Native Americans in the same speech when she said, "How much the schools have taught them of human liberty within the last quarter of a century, I do not know, but I opine that they will make congenial allies to the Antis (anti-suffragists)."²⁹ With that statement, Catt chose to pit her cause against one of the most abused peoples in North America by suggesting they would be unable to comprehend the idea of women's suffrage. Catt spoke of human liberty in one breath and in another advocated the use of woman suffrage as a means of maintaining Anglo-Saxon dominance. White supremacy stripped millions of Native Americans, Africans and African-Americans of their liberty, dignity and, indeed, their very lives.

Nativism: Attack on Foreigners

Catt made many generalizations when it came to immigrants. She objected to the

enfranchisement of immigrants because they came from "... poverty-ridden, ignorance-filled sections of Europe."³⁰ She also thought their votes were purchasable and they were politically corrupt. She argued that, in many states, the number of native-born white women was higher than that of immigrants and their enfranchisement would lessen the power of the foreign vote. Catt also favored increasing the period required before foreigners could become citizens as another means to reduce their impact on the political process.³¹ She felt that many did not understand American traditions and she opposed their participation in the political system. Just as with African-Americans, Catt felt the enfranchisement of immigrants before white middle-class women was an insult. This was tied to her belief that "the danger lies in the ignorant foreign vote."³²

Catt also expressed the belief that immigrants and others were enfranchised with "ill-advised haste" and blamed these "irresponsible citizens" for the "perilous condition of the nation."³³ Catt blamed the problems of the nation on the introduction of immigrants and others into the voting populace. However, immigrants were stripped of their right to vote through different barriers and therefore could not truly affect the state of the nation. The horrid conditions of the country result from the same sexist system that refused to enfranchise women. Instead of attacking the inherently sexist nature of her government, Catt chose to attack a defenseless group of people, some of whom suffered disenfranchisement through brutal means.

Classism: Attack on the Poor

Coming from the middle class, Catt believed that educated women from her class were better equipped to participate in the political process and therefore able to offset the "ignorant vote." For this reason she supported the use of literacy requirements and poll taxes. Yet the political system which denied her the ballot was composed of upper-class educated white men who, in many instances, seemed more ignorant and corrupt than those whom they kept disenfranchised. Because the number of illiterate men exceeded that of women, Catt suggested that women suffrage would increase the proportion of intelligent voters. She complained of the existence "... of nearly a million illiterate Negroes ..." in the voting populace and attributed the existence of "... poverty and insanity ..." to their presence.³⁴ She believed that those in the lower classes were opposed to

woman suffrage. However, there was significant support for her cause among the working class and immigrants.³⁵ In many instances, men from the lower classes and immigrant families seemed more enlightened about women's rights than men from Catt's class.

Catt's tactics did not stop at blaming the lower class for the problems in the political system. She went as far as urging the vote to be cut off at the slums (lower class) and given to women like herself.³⁶ By condoning the disenfranchisement of a group of people who did not control the political process, Catt placed herself in the same category as those who refused to enfranchise her. The reasons for the refusal to enfranchise women on the basis of gender was as ludicrous as the disenfranchisement of the lower class because they were uneducated. The uneducated status of most immigrants and African-Americans had more to do with a classist and racist system's unwillingness to provide for the poor in all their areas of need than with their inability to grasp the traditions of American culture and the idea of woman's suffrage.

Critique of Catt's Methods

A hypothesis supported by some suggests that Catt's racist, xenophobic and classist remarks were part of a necessary strategy to win the support of southern Congressmen and other opponents of woman's suffrage. The devastating effect of this strategy is missed by such a hypothesis. During this period of time, African-Americans and Native Americans were eliminated and disenfranchised through both constitutional and unconstitutional means. To suggest that the enfranchisement of white women would strengthen white supremacy was to condone the existence of a dehumanizing Jim Crow system. By aligning their cause with the white supremacist power structure, suffragists chose to pit themselves against several other suppressed groups.

If Catt's methods were truly for the good of all, her actions after the passage of the 19th Amendment casts doubt on that theory. Although the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920, women of color could not vote in most southern states until 1965 with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1964.³⁷ If women such as Catt had decided not to use racist slurs and the Amendment had been defeated, white women would have been in the same predicament as most women of color. At least the idea of solidarity would have been truthful. What most people fail to realize is this: if Catt was fighting for all women, her actions *after* the passage of

the Amendment do not reflect this. There is no evidence of any action by Catt to challenge the disenfranchisement of women of color in many states of the Union. For the most part, white women's organizations did not assist women of color in claiming their right to vote.³⁸

But African-American women were not the only ones to suffer. After the passage of the 19th Amendment, Catt continued to use derogatory language toward immigrants. If her offensive speeches and writings until 1920 were merely tactics to gain the vote, her reasons for continued use of such language after the passage of the Amendment is unclear. In a speech in 1939, for instance, Catt said the average immigrant "has enormously lowered the standard of our civilization."³⁹ When she chose to demean the character of immigrants in that speech, there was no political agenda behind it. Such language casts doubt on the theory that her actions were merely to gain the support of anti-suffragists.

The use of powerless groups of people for politically expedient means is practiced by some even today. Those who are used are the same groups who do not benefit from the results. By insisting that Catt used Native Americans, Latino/as, African-Americans and immigrants as politically expedient for the good of all people, it is forgotten that, for example, Black women in the South could not vote until 1965. Therefore, the common good of all people was not achieved through Catt's actions of using people as politically expedient. In the case of the suffragists, by not challenging the system, white women contributed to the disenfranchisement of men and women of color as well as immigrants.

Summary

The reality of racism's existence within the woman's suffrage movement is supported by the actions of many suffragists, including Catt. While some may point to the necessity of such strategies, excusing the use of racist, classist and xenophobic speeches, writings and actions is tantamount to justifying the use of people for politically expedient means. In this case, the ends do not justify the means. White women who agree with Catt believe they compromised their principles for the "good of all." Yet the disenfranchisement of women of color in the south and the lack of action on the part of white women's organizations disproves these claims. Women of color struggled for an additional 45 years before being granted suffrage.

Although Catt's efforts and her unrelenting support of white middle-class women

should be commended, it misrepresents the facts to say she supported all women. Her willingness to use racism so blatantly is impossible to condone. It is apparent that Catt did not favor a mixed national community. Diversity was not in her interest. Would her tactics, if used today, be supported by all women? The answer should clearly be "no." Therefore, it is not in the interests of non-majority groups, or anyone who opposes racism and classism, to support or condone her methods for any reason. It is clear that Catt's actions were just as wrong during her time as they are today.

End Notes-- Works Cited

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- ³ Wheeler, Marjorie S., *One Woman, One Vote: Rediscovering the Woman Suffrage Movement*. New York: NewSage Press, 1995. p. 10.
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- ⁵ Simon, Rita and Danzinger, Gloria. *Women's Movements in America: Their Successes, Disappointments and Aspirations*. Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1991. p. 13.
- ⁶ Wheeler, *Op. cit.*, p. 11.
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- ⁹ Catt, Carrie C. *Woman Suffrage by Federal Constitutional Amendment*. New York: National Woman Suffrage Publishing Co., 1917. p. 77.
- ¹⁰ Wheeler, *Op. cit.*, p. 152.
- ¹¹ "Suffragist used Race to Win Vote" Siren, Dec. 11, 1995. p. A1.
- ¹² Shuler, Nettie and Catt, Carrie C., *Woman Suffrage and Politics*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923. p. 490.
- ¹³ *Ibid.* p. 43
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 491.
- ¹⁵ Kraditor, Eileen. *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement: 1890-1920*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981. p. 198-199.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 203.
- ¹⁷ Wheeler, *Op. cit.*, p. 148.
- ¹⁸ Andolson, *Op. cit.*, 16.
- ¹⁹ Catt, *Op. cit.*, p. 76.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Fowler, *Op. cit.*, p. 87.
- ²⁴ Andolsen, *Op. cit.* p. 33.
- ²⁵ Shuler and Catt, *Op. cit.*, p. 164.
- ²⁶ Andolsen, *Op. cit.*, p. 33.

- ²⁷ Catt, Carrie C., *Speech: Response*. 1916: 12. Library of Congress: Catt Collection.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Fowler, *Op. cit.*, p. 81.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- ³² Kraditor, *Op. cit.*, p. 123.
- ³³ Andolsen, *Op. cit.*, p. 69.
- ³⁴ *Woman's Journal*, "Mrs. Catt's Address," Feb. 20, 1904, p. 57 and 59.
- ³⁵ Fowler, *Op. cit.*, p. 84.
- ³⁶ Kraditor, *Op. cit.*, p. 125.
- ³⁷ Wheeler, *Op. cit.*, p. 136.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ Carrie Chapman Catt, *Speech on Pan Hellenic Program*. New York's World Fair, July 13, 1939, p. 4. Library of Congress: Catt Collection.

From *Why Mumia Must Live and Go Free*

Revolution must live
 Revolution
 Not just speeches, and marches,
 or protest, jail, and guns,
 It's not just about meetings and flyers
 It's about ordinary peoples' will and
 their push to live better lives...

 It's about the love of life
 and of people
 Not out of Academia or political correctness
 but out of the very hearts of our souls...

 It's about loving freedom
 more than anything else in the world

---Ras Baraka

Sept. 27, 28 & 29, 1996

THE SEPTEMBER 29th MOVEMENT

Celebrates ...

A Year of Resistance,

A Year of Struggle

FRI., SEPT. 27 - NOON RALLY

**Place: TBA (to be
announced)**

**SAT., SEPT. 28 - "Wisdom, Knowledge,
Understanding"**

**WORKSHOP & Films
about resistance and
struggle**

Place: TBA

SUN., SEPTEMBER 29: TBA

STAY TUNED ...

In the meanwhile:

Agitate, agitate and uh, agitate!